



Stronger Together by OverTheMoon322

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Summary: While on their summer vacation Mike, El, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Will and Robert (OC) encounter a strange mansion in the woods with supernatural ties, leading them on a new adventure. In addition, Robert has been harboring a secret crush on one of his friends. Will his feelings be returned? Takes place 8 months after season 2 (Summer of 1985) and is told from Robert's perspective.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note: Hi everyone! Thanks for choosing my story to read! I've been working on this one for the last couple of months, and it's my first ever fan fiction. I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I have writing it! It's basically been all written and will be 11 chapters total, but I just keep finding little things to add in or tweak every day. I'm publishing the first three chapters to start and then will add another chapter every week or so.

Chapter One: The Mansion

It's now July of 1985, eight months after Eleven closed the gate to the Upside Down. Summer vacation started a few weeks ago, and we were making the most of it — crazy long campaigns of Dungeons and Dragons, pool parties at Steve's house, and extended trips to the arcade. We even got to see *Back to the Future*, a super awesome time travel movie, when it was released at The Hawk, our local movie theater. We camped outside for hours so we could get good seats. Our party was the largest it had ever been, now seven members. There was Mike, the de facto leader of the group who usually came up with the Dungeons and Dragons campaigns. He had pale skin with freckles on his face and raven colored medium length hair. He was the tallest out of all us. Mike was pretty open-minded about most things and extremely optimistic. He was the force that pushed us to have faith that Will was still alive when he had been taken by the Demogorgon, and he never gave up hope that El was still out there somewhere when she disappeared after killing the Demogorgon. Lucas, a skinny black kid with a very short afro, was the pragmatic and skeptical one. He always made sure we thought about things and situations realistically before moving forward. He and Mike would often find themselves on opposite sides of an argument because of their contrasting approaches. Then there was Dustin, who moved to Hawkins in the fourth grade. He had a medical condition called cleidocranial dysplasia, which affected the development of his teeth, and he almost always wore a baseball cap over his curly brown hair. He always tried to keep the peace and make sure our party functioned at its best. Will, who had a brown bowl cut and was the shortest out of all of us, was very creative and usually quieter than

the others but had a great sense of humor and showed it off when it counted. He's had a very troubled past couple of years, first being taken by the Demogorgon and then possessed by the Mind Flayer, but our party never gave up on him and did everything it could to get him back, twice. Then there was me. My name is Robert, and I was the fourth member to join the party. I was just a tiny bit shorter than Mike, making me the second tallest of the group. I had medium length dark brown hair and was fairly skinny. While I was always pretty shy, like Will, being in the party gave me more self-confidence because there were others like me who didn't quite fit in with everyone else. Nancy, Mike's sister, told me once I was the most emotionally mature one out of the group but quipped I was her second favorite after Dustin, whom she thought had the best sense of humor, which I couldn't help but agree with. I guess it was because I always tried to be polite and considerate of people's feelings. I didn't like making a scene, but if my friends were, I would be right there with them. To Nancy, I was the little brother she wished Mike would act more like. Sometimes when I would go over to the Wheelers' for playdates with Mike, I'd end up spending more time with Nancy because we both liked playing with dolls, but when after a while I realized Mike felt left out and a bit jealous, I apologized and went back to playing with him. When Nancy started middle school she stopped hanging out with me, but she always stayed friendly. Mike never told the other party members I used to play with dolls, which I was grateful for.

Mike and Will met on the first day of kindergarten and Lucas joined them shortly thereafter. I met Will in the first grade, and he introduced me to Mike and Lucas. Before I knew it I was absorbed into the party. I lived on the same street as Mike and Lucas, Maple Street, but a little farther down.

The week Will was taken by the Demogorgon was the worst week of my life. I took the whole ordeal particularly hard because he was my first and best friend. When it dawned on the party that Will was actually missing and not just home sick or hiding in Castle Byers, I had to hide my tears from Mike, Dustin and Lucas. I'd cry every night he was gone, hoping he was still alive and safe somewhere. I did my best to stay strong when I was with the party. Mike helped make it easier to hold on to hope of finding Will, and I could never thank him

enough for that. I remember how euphoric it was when I finally saw Will again in the hospital bed after he was rescued from the Upside Down. The look on his face when I came over to hug him was one I could never forget. While it was incredibly painful to watch Will suffer while he was possessed by the mind flayer a year later, I took solace in him still physically being with us, and by that point I was already used to Upside Down-related stuff.

Now, our party had two girls, which was cool. Of course there's Eleven, or El, though her real name was Jane. She didn't really care which name we called her but we usually called her El. The brown curly haired teen had crazy telekinetic powers and had saved our butts so many times. She had a troubled past, being raised inside Hawkins Lab like a lab rat by the despicable Dr. Brenner, but she's doing much better now living with Chief Jim Hopper as his adopted daughter. One time during our search for Will, when the other party members weren't around, El caught me crying. At first I was extremely embarrassed, but then she approached me and gave me a hug. It was like it was instinctual for her. She just told me she understood as she embraced me. That was when I knew El wasn't some crazy Russian spy or juvenile delinquent like Lucas thought but a good person. From that moment on, I trusted El as much as Mike did and took his side in his spat against Lucas. Then there was Max, or Mad Max, as we initially called her. She had long red hair and fair skin. She recently moved here from California and started hanging out with us around Halloween last year. She defied all our expectations on what a girl is supposed to like. She skated and was amazing at video games, beating Dustin's high score at Dig Dug by a lot. She always told it like it was, which was refreshing for our party when we would sometimes get stuck in our ways. It took a bit for her to get fully on board with all the craziness the Upside Down brought into our lives, which made sense, considering how insane it all would sound to someone who hadn't seen a demogorgon up close. At first, El hated Max because she believed that Max was flirting with Mike and trying to replace her. Once it was clear to her Max liked Lucas and had no intention of replacing El in the party, the two became inseparable. Now Max was dating Lucas, and El was dating Mike. Both couples were basically cemented at the Snowball dance back in December.

That dance, while it was in some ways cathartic for all of us after the demodog fiasco back in the fall, I remember it being very awkward. Although a girl asked me to dance and I accepted, I didn't really feel anything particularly toward her. All I could focus on was how hurt I was watching Will dance with some other girl in our grade. I guess I should be thankful that at least I wasn't stuck having to dance with Nancy like Dustin was. The others think she's annoying but like I said, she's always been nice to me. Generally, I've always been more comfortable around girls than Mike, Dustin, Lucas or Will were around them. I did my best to make Max feel welcome in the party while Mike tried to push her away. That was a point of contention between Mike and me, but he eventually backed down after El showed up in our lives again, a year after we had seen her last.

It was a Saturday afternoon in July that ended up being the most significant event in our lives since El closed the gate. We all rode our bikes around the woods after hitting the arcade for an hour. We usually stay longer, but we were all out of allowance money. Figures, considering how often we're at that arcade. We've been riding our bikes all over Hawkins for years now, so we had a good lay of the land. That's why it was so strange when Mike spotted a completely new path.

"I'm telling you, *Back to the Future* makes no sense," Lucas declared. "How would Marty's parents not recognize him back in the present if he was responsible for them meeting in the first place?"

Dustin groaned. "They saw him for like one week thirty years ago. You really think they're going to remember Marty's face long enough to realize it was actually their own son who time travelled, which, by the way, they didn't even know was a thing that existed?"

"Oh, and then Marty comes home and everything is different but he still lived through the original timeline. There would be so many inconsistencies between his life and the one he apparently lived in the new timeline," Lucas argued.

"Not everything is different. He's just richer and his parents and siblings are cooler," Dustin corrected him.

"It's just a movie, can't you guys enjoy how awesome it was?" I asked

Dustin and Lucas.

"It's not just a movie, it's like the coolest thing since Star Wars," Dustin insisted.

"Don't even compare it to Star Wars," Lucas glared at Dustin.

"Hey guys..." Mike said, looking uneasy. Dustin and Lucas continued to argue. "GUYS!" he shouted.

We stopped our bikes. El was riding on Mike's bike because she was still learning how to ride. Everyone else had their own bike.

"Mike, what's going on?" Will asked.

"There's a path here that I'm pretty sure wasn't here yesterday," he responded.

"I don't remember that path being there either," I added.

"Danger," El said softly. She could feel the presence of something powerful down the path.

"Danger?" Mike asked.

"I don't like the sound of that," Lucas said.

"I think we should see what's down that path," Dustin decided. "If there's something dangerous here, we should figure out what it is."

I agreed. "Seems reasonable to me."

Max and Mike nodded. Will looked puzzled.

We all looked at Will.

"Will, what do you think we should do?" Mike asked, speaking for all of us.

Will stared at the ground for a few seconds. He looked up. "I think we should go see what's down the path," he said. "Maybe it's dangerous, but at least we'll all be together."

I always admired Will's optimism. Despite everything he's been through, he had faith in our party. I guess a lot of that had to do with El playing a big role in saving his life twice.

"I really think we should reconsider this," Lucas said. "We could be walking into a trap. Maybe we should listen to the girl with psychic powers."

"The majority votes for going down the path, so that's what we're gonna do," Mike declared. "Besides you have your wrist-rocket if things go south."

"Yeah because it's helped me every other time we've faced something from the Upside Down," Lucas muttered.

Max put her hand on Lucas's shoulder. "Don't worry, stalker. The gate's closed. It's probably just rough terrain or something." Lucas looked at her, still worried but knows nothing will change the party's mind at this point.

As we biked down the tree-flanked path, a ginormous Craftsman style mansion came into view. We were all in awe of the size of the place as no one in Hawkins had a house this large, at least that we knew of.

"Who lives here?" Mike wondered out loud.

Max scoffed at our bewilderment. "Please. You guys look like you've never seen a mansion before. In California, lot's of people live in houses this size. Some even bigger. It's probably just some rich guy who owns property in town."

"I don't think anyone lives here. It looks like it's been vacant for years," I replied. The landscaping was overgrown and ivy vines overtook some of the exterior walls. The grayish blue paint of the exterior was chipping in some spots. The windows were coated with brownish dirt, making it difficult to see inside. I took a snapshot of the place with my Pentax MX that I carried with me everywhere. I was like the group's historian, documenting our adventures, especially when Will's brother Jonathan wasn't around, because I believed that photographs strengthen memories.

"I say we check it out! Maybe there's a key under the door mat," Dustin said.

El looked visibly uncomfortable. Mike grabbed her hand.

"There's nothing to worry about. We're just exploring a cool house. Besides if there really is something dangerous, you're here," he assured her. El smiled quickly at him but her worry returned just as fast.

I turned to Will. "Pretty cool place, huh?"

Will looked at me with his big hazel eyes. "Yeah! It's as big as the library, if not bigger." The Byers family didn't have a lot of money, so Will hadn't gotten to travel very much and see bigger cities.

We parked our bikes at the foot of the stairs leading up to the front door.

"How about a picture, guys?" I asked.

"Sure," Max said. Dustin nodded, while Mike groaned. He was never really into people taking his picture, especially not his mom.

Everyone grouped up in front of the steps. I took a few large steps back to accommodate everyone in the frame. From left to right it was, Lucas, Max, Will, Mike, El, and Dustin.

"Smile!"

Lucas, Max, Will and Dustin grinned, but Mike just kept a straight face. El attempted to smile, but I could see the worry in her face even from as far back as I was standing. I pressed the shutter button and took the shot.

"Hey, Robert! Don't you wanna be in it?" Max asked me.

"Oh, um sure, I guess."

"Here, I'll take it," she offered. Max walked over to where I was standing and took my camera.

"Thanks." I sauntered over to everyone else.

"You can squeeze in here." Will said cheerily, gesturing to where Max had been standing before.

Lucas let me in. Will put his arm around my shoulder. His touch gave me butterflies. Blushing slightly, I put my left arm around Will and my right arm around Lucas.

"Alright guys, smile!" She took the shot. Lowering the camera from her eye, Max called out, "I think that turned out really well!"

"He did set up the shot for you," Dustin snarked. Max glared at him.

"Can we just go inside already?" Mike groaned, tired of our little photo shoot.

Max gave me back my camera. We ran up the steps, eager to see what awaited us inside, danger or no danger. Mike moved his hand to the door latch and pushed down.

"It's unlocked," Mike said. He opened the door inward.

The inside did not match the outside, that was for sure. Everything looked immaculate and polished. The carpeting looked fresh and the furniture new. There were no sign of personal items that normally make a house a home. No personal touches. *Strange*, I thought. We all gazed at the grand double staircases in front of us, leading to another floor with many additional rooms. It was at this moment that everything became a bit hazy. I know we all broke off to explore different parts of the house. Mike went with El and Lucas with Max, while Dustin, Will and I were the remaining three. Mike and El took the left downstairs wing. Lucas and Max took the right upstairs wing. I decided to take the left upstairs wing and lost track of Dustin and Will. It was as if someone was calling me toward this particular part of the mansion, like it was tailor made for me.

I moved through the hallway, which seemed to snake every which way. There was one door I needed to open and I knew which one it was. It didn't look different from any of the other doors, but it was my door. Time seemed to move at a snail's pace as I continued

following every turn. It reminded me of those dreams I would have where I'd find myself in an obnoxiously laid out public bathroom with stalls in configurations that made no sense, some elevated off the ground and none of them laid out linearly. I would try to find the perfect stall to use but was never satisfied and kept looking for a better one. Finally, I found the door at the end of the maze of a hallway. At this point I couldn't hear the others and had no idea where in the mansion they were, but that was not going through my mind at this moment — just this door and that I had to open it.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two: The Baseball Game

Once I opened it, I was outside. I wasn't outside the mansion, but instead at a park or school field. I could smell freshly trimmed grass and grilling hot dogs. I walked closer toward the fence to see what was happening. It was a little league game in progress, and the scoreboard read 2-2 in the bottom of the third inning. I kept watching to see if I recognized anyone. I didn't know any of the players. Lifting my camera up to my eye, I took a few snapshots of the game.

"You're late." The umpire marched over to me. He lifted his mask off. He was a handsome black man with a strong jaw who looked to be in his mid forties. He wore a black shirt and gray pants. He had a rich deep baritone voice that was commanding yet smooth.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," I replied.

"For the game, of course. Your team has missed you." He pointed to the home team dugout. "Coach told me their star hitter was absent."

"I think you have the wrong guy," I said. "I'm terrible at baseball. I didn't even make it past coach pitch."

"You are Robert, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Then I believe you are the right guy." He flashed a toothy grin at me. Something about his smile was unsettling. "You're up to bat according to the batting order."

"I don't even have a uniform."

"That's alright. Everyone will recognize you better without one anyway."

My cheeks went red. I had never been very good at sports, and I had quit little league even earlier than I had soccer or basketball. Being

regarded so highly as a valuable player was odd, to say the least, but flattering.

"No time to waste," the umpire said before waving me over to the home dugout. I walked through the gate into the in-field and made my way over to the dugout. I didn't see a coach, which was strange. Perhaps he was on a bathroom break. I put my camera down on the bench. One of my teammates handed me an aluminum bat and a helmet. I stepped up to the plate.

The pitcher threw a fastball at me. *Well, here comes strike one*, I thought. I swung. The ball soared high and far, way over the heads of the outfielders. It cleared the back wall. I started running toward first base. My teammates were cheering, "Home run!" as I circled the bases. I couldn't believe what I had just done. As I touched home base, the umpire leaned in toward me.

"Looks like you really are a star hitter after all. And look who came to support you." He pointed toward the first-base side stands. Will was sitting in the crowd cheering me on. He waved at me. I waved back sheepishly. If that home run wasn't reassuring enough, I knew I had to keep playing for Will. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to impress him. Still I couldn't help but feel something was off about this whole game. Since when was I good at hitting? Would I also be as good at fielding? To top it off, the umpire gave me the creeps.

A few innings and home runs later, the game was tied yet again at the bottom of the ninth inning. Turns out I was a decent fielder too. Threw some balls in for tag-outs and caught a few hits. I was up to bat again. I turned around to look at Will, who waved at me, beaming. I smiled back. He looked exactly the same as before when I first saw him in the stands. Same wave. Same smile. *Weird*, I thought. I shrugged it off and focused my attention back to the game, waiting for the first pitch. As the pitcher wound up, I suddenly remembered a word that I felt like I had heard a lifetime ago. *Danger*. It rang in my head.

Bam! The ball struck me on my left arm. I winced in pain as the ball dropped to the ground. I let go of the bat and grabbed my arm.

"Hit by pitch! Go ahead and walk to first base," the umpire shouted.

He walked over to me before I could start walking. "Something wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Just misread the pitch, that's all." I replied, suspicious of him and his extra attention on me. I walked over to first base. I looked over to see Will's reaction to me getting hit, but he was gone. No sign of him at all. Then I remembered that word again, "danger." This time, I could clearly hear El saying it. I caught the umpire looking at me. I could sense a smirk through his mask. It seemed malicious. I knew now something was very wrong. The personal attention given to me by the umpire, the fact that I was unusually good at the game, Will disappearing out of thin air. This had to be some sort of sham. I had to find Will and get out of this baseball game.

I darted off first base toward the stands.

"Going somewhere?" The umpire approached unnaturally fast.

"What did you do with Will?" I demanded.

"Nothing. You made him disappear when you failed to perform. What disappointment he must feel for you."

"That's insane. He would never leave me behind just because I got hit by a pitch." *Right?*

"You have to win the game if you want him to come back, but you'll never truly win. You'll keep trying and trying. Doing whatever it takes to make him accept you, but it won't be enough. You already knew that, though, didn't you?"

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. It was like he was digging into my psyche, as if he knew how much I truly cared about Will. I had always liked him as more than a friend, but I could never bring myself to tell him that. Boys weren't supposed to like other boys, so I had been conditioned. Will couldn't possibly like me back in that way, so I settled for just being his best friend. How would he even react to me being gay? He'd probably be grossed out or scared to be around me, as if he and the rest of the group needed another excuse to get beaten up at school. He'd probably be polite about it but then avoid me. I'd get kicked out of the party and become a pariah. Robert

the Fag they'd call me. How did this umpire know my deepest desires and fears? Suddenly, something clicked. I realized what this place truly must be — my own mind.

I grabbed my camera from the dugout bench and bolted away from the field grabbing my arm, desperate to get back to reality. This wasn't like any dream I had had before. It was vivid, like some sort of drug trip. I ran back to the door I had entered through.

"YOU MIGHT ESCAPE NOW, BUT YOU'LL BE BACK!" A giant head with the face of the umpire surrounded by a black shadow screamed toward me as I shut the door and exited this twisted hallucination.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three: Lost Lucas

I was back in the mansion. It was just a normal linear hallway with no snaking turns like I saw before. The throbbing pain from the baseball hitting my arm was gone — just a memory. I wondered if the pictures I took at the game were actually on my film roll or not. Before I could really think about it, El came running toward me.

"We have to wake everyone up. Now!"

"El, I saw something in there..." I started to say.

"Not now. No time," she cut me off. We went around searching every room to find our friends who were all caught in similar hallucinations. This mansion was somehow possessed by something sinister. We, or more specifically El, woke Mike first, then Dustin, Will, and finally Max. Lucas was still missing after our preliminary sweep.

"Max, what happened to Lucas? You were with him when we split up," Mike asked. He and everyone else looked visibly disturbed by what they had all experienced.

"I don't know! We were together one moment, and the next we weren't. Then, of course, I started seeing weird shit."

"We have to keep looking. This place is big, but he has to be around here somewhere," Mike said.

"What if he was taken by another demogorgon?" Dustin asked.

"No," El said. "He's here. I can sense it."

Still looking, the mansion echoed with us calling out for Lucas.

"Lucas! Lucas! Where are you?!"

"Guys, I found him..." Will said gravely, looking at the last door in the right upstairs wing. We all crowded around as he opened the

door to reveal a large parlor with a balcony and large picture windows. A glossy black grand piano sat in the center of the room and floor to ceiling bookcases lined the walls. Lucas was lying on the floor unconscious fifteen feet into the room.

We all rushed into the room and over to Lucas. El told us to give her some space. She blindfolded herself with a handkerchief and put her hand on his head. We watched anxiously as she attempted to contact him through the Void.

"Lucas?" El called out. "Lucas!" No response. El got louder: "Turn back! Turn back!" Lucas remained motionless but breathing. El wiped her nose and removed the blindfold. She shook her head.

"Stalker! Wake up!" Max said, holding back tears.

"Lucas! LUCAS!" Mike shouted.

"Oh my god. Oh my god," Dustin mumbled.

"What's wrong with him?" I yelled. "Why won't he wake up?"

"He's been taken. I can't reach him," El answered sorrowfully.

"Taken? Who took him?" Mike demanded.

"Bad man," El responded. "His mind is trapped by the bad man."

"Like Will by the mind flayer?" Dustin said slowly. We all turned to look at Will.

Will looked like he was about to cry. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have come here. This is my fault." A tear rolled down his cheek.

Mike put his hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault, Will. We all made a decision together to check out this place. We'll figure out how to get Lucas back. We got you back."

I watched his embrace of Will, wishing it was me who had tried to comfort him, but I was paralyzed with fear over the entire situation and still thinking about what I had just experienced behind the door that called out to me. Also, I perhaps tried a little too hard to not give

away my feelings for Will around everyone else.

"We need to leave. Let's grab Lucas and try to radio Hopper to come pick us up," Dustin said.

"Good idea. Mike come help me pick him up," I said, snapping back into the moment. I lifted Lucas's arms and put mine under his. Mike grabbed his legs. We lifted him up together.

"Let's move! He's heavy," Mike shouted. The rest of the party scurried out of the room and down the hall and stairs. We followed behind them moving a bit slower because of the extra coordination that was required when two people are carrying another person.

Dustin turned on his walkie talkie as he scurried down the stairs. "Come in Hopper! Hopper! This is an emergency!" There was no response. Talking out of the walkie talkie, Dustin exclaimed, "Shit! Shit!"

"This is Hopper. What's the emergency?" Hopper's response came through Dustin's walkie talkie. It was fairly distorted from the distance we were from town.

"Lucas is unconscious and not responding. We think his mind is trapped like Will was with the mind flayer. Over."

"Where are you?" Hopper asked.

"We're at some ginormous mansion in the woods. Also say over when you're done talking so I know you're actually done."

"Mansion? What mansion? Over," Hopper asked, sounding irritated by Dustin's criticism of his walkie talkie etiquette.

Dustin responded, "It's a mile past the scrapyard. There's a path off of Mirkwood. Can't miss it. Over."

As Dustin talked to Hopper, we all reached the front door. Max held the door open for Mike and me as we carried Lucas out onto the front porch. We slowly made our way down the stairs and to our bikes. We put Lucas down again and took a breather, all of us sitting on the steps.

"Alright. I'll be there as soon as I can. How many of you are there? Over."

"The whole party. Seven of us. Over."

"I'll tell Joyce to follow. You won't all fit in my truck. Over and out."

Dustin closed the antenna of his walkie talkie.

As we waited for Hopper and Joyce to pick us up, no seemed to know what to say. I think everyone was still processing whatever they saw inside the mansion.

Max broke the silence. "El, you said a bad man took Lucas?"

El looked at Max solemnly. She nodded.

Max replied, "I saw some man in my dream. He had dark skin and a..."

"Creepy smile? I saw him too," Mike said. Max looked surprised.

"Me too." I said. Everyone looked at me, realizing there was a trend.

"Same here," Dustin chimed in. We turned to him.

"Will, did you see him?" Mike asked. Everyone looked at Will, interested in what he might have to say about all of this.

Will looked anxious. He nodded quickly but then looked away. He couldn't make eye contact with any of us. I could tell something was bothering him. He hadn't acted this weird since he had been seeing into the Upside Down right around the time he was possessed by the mind flayer.

"Dustin, you compared the bad man to the mind flayer earlier. What if there's something to that?" Max asked.

"I don't know. It's the best analogy I could think of," Dustin replied.

"The bad man was familiar. Like I had faced him before. But somehow different too," El said. She had become much better at

speaking from hanging out with us and going to school.

"Nancy told me when they burned the mind flayer out of Will, something shadowy flew out of his mouth and into the woods," Mike recalled. "Will, you were connected to the mind flayer. Is the bad man somehow the same thing?"

Will buried his face in his lap. He couldn't hold back his tears any longer.

"Will, what happened in your dream?" Mike asked him, raising his voice.

"Leave him alone!" I blurted out. Everyone but Will stared at me. My cheeks went crimson.

Mike stood up and faced me. "I'm just trying to get answers to what's going on with Lucas. I think whatever he saw in there will help us," Mike replied, looking irritated.

I stood up and stepped closer to Mike. "He clearly doesn't want to talk about it right now, so back off." We were squared off like Mike and Lucas were back when they disagreed about whether El was helping us find Will or hindering our efforts. I was hoping it wouldn't come to physical blows in this moment, but I'm sure El would make sure we didn't touch each other.

"Our friend is sitting here unconscious and probably possessed and you just want us to sit around and do nothing about it?!" Mike yelled at me.

"Chill out," Max said. "The testosterone levels out here are high enough without you two starting a fight."

I sat back down. Mike followed suit.

"Maybe we can burn it out of Lucas too," Dustin suggested, trying to move the conversation away from Will.

Before anyone could respond to Dustin's suggestion, Hopper's police Chevy Blazer rolled up and parked in front of them. Joyce Byers's olive green Ford Pinto was right behind it. Hopper got out and ran

towards us.

"Out of the way!" he shouted as he approached us. He bent down to get a good look at Lucas. He checked his pulse.

"Well, he's still breathing, so that's a plus," he said dryly. Hopper always tried to bring a little levity to a bad situation. Still, we were not really amused. "I'll take him back to the Sinclairs' in my truck. Two of you can come with me. The rest of you go with Joyce."

As if on cue, Joyce ran toward us. "Will! Baby, are you ok?" She made her way over to Will and hugged him. Will, still looking very distraught hugged her back. He wiped his eyes. "What happened, and what is this place?" Joyce asked.

"Something got inside of all our minds and took Lucas," Will sobbed.

"I'm just glad you're ok. We'll fix Lucas. Whatever is wrong with him, we'll fix him."

"You think so?"

Joyce looked at Will, "I know so, honey."

Will had the best mom a kid could ask for. When Will went missing and when he was possessed by the Mind Flayer, she fought tooth and nail to get him back. She believed he was alive when so many others in Hawkins had already given up searching for him. Even when his "body" was found, she rightfully didn't believe it was Will's. It warmed my heart seeing Will comforted by his mom.

Hopper picked Lucas up and put him in the small back seat of his truck. We all put our bikes in the flat bed. El was Hopper's adopted daughter so naturally she went with Hopper and Max decided to join them so she could stay by Lucas's side, while Dustin, Mike, Will, and I went with Joyce.

Joyce turned around to face us sitting in the back seat. "I'm taking you all back to your houses. I don't want any of you biking around tonight. Clearly it's not safe. Understand?"

"Got it, Mrs. Byers," we said in unison. Will was silent.

The ride back to our neighborhood was practically silent. We were too lost in our own thoughts and concerns about Lucas to talk. The sun had finished setting and the pink light on the horizon began to fade away, leaving a dark blue evening glow by the time we pulled up at Dustin's house. Dustin got out and waved us goodnight. We pulled up across the street at the Wheeler residence and Mike got out.

"Sorry I pressured you earlier," Mike said to Will as he unbuckled his seat belt. "Whenever you're ready to tell us what you saw, just let us know." Will didn't respond. Mike got out of the car and waved us goodnight. I was left alone in the backseat while Will and his mom were in the front. I could tell by Will's silence toward Mike that he was clearly very uncomfortable with whatever he saw in his dream and was not about to say anything about it anytime soon.

"Hey mom, remember Robert was going to stay over tonight?" Will reminded her. "Can he still?"

Earlier this week, Will and I had planned for me to stay over tonight. We sometimes had sleepovers without the rest of the party, especially more so since some of them started coupling up. Oftentimes Will and I would hang out in Castle Byers. He would draw these very detailed and beautiful pictures with his huge box of crayons, and I would hang up my photos that he picked out from the stacks of them I brought over. Pretty soon the walls were covered with his illustrations and favorite photos. This past morning I had dropped my stuff off at Will's house before we went out to the arcade. After everything that happened this afternoon, I had let go of any chance our sleepover was still on. I stayed quiet as I waited for his mom's answer.

"Oh, that's right," Joyce remembered. "I'll call his mom to let her know where he is when we get home."

"Thanks, Mom." For a brief moment, Will seemed happy.

"Thanks Mrs. Byers," I said. Part of me was relieved that I was going to stay over and wouldn't have to go home alone after a traumatic day. Will most likely felt the same way. On the other hand, I was kind of nervous. I usually was pretty good at suppressing my feelings for him when we hung out, but today brought to the surface a lot of

those emotions. It was going to be much harder to be around him. The other part of me wished I could just go home and not have to worry about any of it. In the end, I knew I had to be there for him, even if he wasn't looking to talk about what he saw in the mansion.

"Please. Call me Joyce," she said.

I couldn't stop thinking about Lucas. He was so skeptical about going inside the mansion, and he ended up paying the price for it while the rest of us just walked out with a bad taste in our mouths. Trying to think about something else, my mind wandered to the umpire's words. No matter how good of a friend I was to Will, he'd never accept how I truly felt about him. That was obvious. I was sure he wasn't gay, but I couldn't help but fantasize about finally telling him how I felt anyway. *Will, I'm gay and I love you. Hey Will! I'm secretly gay and have a crush on you! Ever thought we could be more than friends?* God every way of saying it sounded so stupid in my head. Was there really any way that didn't sound dumb? Just thinking about this gave me a sick feeling in my stomach. There was no way I could actually do it.

4. Chapter 4

Author's Note: Hey so I decided to publish the next chapter even sooner! There's lots of fluff in this one. Enjoy!

Chapter Four: The Sleepover

We finally pulled up to the Byers residence. Jonathan's car was parked in the driveway. He was home from his shift at work. We got out of Joyce's Ford Pinto and walked into their house.

"Hi Mom. Hi Will. Hi Robert?" Jonathan looked at me confused. "Didn't know we were having company tonight."

"Hey Jonathan," I said back. I didn't talk to Jonathan much. He was quiet around Will's friends but always polite. I knew he and Will were very close. Will enjoyed showing me music that his brother had shown him. Artists like The Talking Heads, New Order, and The Clash were his favorites. Jonathan also recently started dating Mike's sister Nancy since Nancy broke up with Steve. We probably should have talked more since he and I were both into photography. I'm sure he could give me a few pointers.

"I only made enough dinner for three. Is everyone all right to eat a little less?" Joyce asked.

"I think I'll pass. I'm not really that hungry anyway," I replied. I knew it was rude to refuse a meal as a guest, but I had lost my appetite in the car, and I really didn't want to throw up and embarrass myself even more.

Joyce looked concerned: "You sure? I don't want you to go hungry."

"Yeah I'll be ok."

"We have snacks in the pantry and fridge if you get hungry later."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"You know what? I'm not hungry either," Will said out of nowhere. *That's odd*, I thought.

"Will? You too? Does this have to do with whatever you saw in that place?" Joyce asked her son.

"No. I'm just not hungry right now. I'll get some snacks later, I promise," Will answered. I wondered if he was lying about his lack of appetite not having to do with what he saw, or if he was just trying to make me not feel left out of dinner.

"Ok more for us," Jonathan said.

Will led me out of the hall and into his room. He closed the door.

"You wanna watch a movie?" he asked me with a small smile. I was confused at his shift in mood. He seemed more excited, or perhaps "antsy" was a better word for it.

"Umm, sure," I answered.

"Which one?" He brought over a tall stack of VHS tapes and dropped them on his bed. They toppled over into a mess with a loud clacking sound of tapes hitting against each other. Will was normally pretty meticulous, so this seemed out of character to treat his VHS tapes so haphazardly.

"*Empire Strikes Back*?" I suggested.

"Perfect," he agreed.

We went into the living room where the TV was. I sat down on the couch while he put the VHS tape in. He plopped down next to me and worked the remote to start the movie. Nancy and Jonathan were eating dinner in the kitchen for the first twenty minutes or so. Every so often, I would glance over at Will. He was so beautiful. He had these delicate facial features and a small mole just above his lips on the right side of his face, as well as those big hazel eyes I wished I could stare into forever. Admiring him like this wasn't anything new for me, but I studied him particularly in this moment because I was deeply concerned about him. I had a feeling he was trying to distract himself from thinking about this afternoon. Watching a movie would mean we wouldn't have to talk but we would still be together. I let him have this time, but I knew I needed to address whatever was

bothering him, not just because I cared about his well-being, but because if he actually saw something that could help the party rescue Lucas, then we needed to know. I know I stopped everyone from pressuring him earlier about his dream, but maybe he would talk to me one-on-one. Will didn't like everyone babying him or being the center of attention. He still had some bouts of nightmares and stress from being taken by the Demogorgon and possessed by the Mind Flayer, so anything related to the Upside Down was a delicate subject for him. I would have to be careful.

A couple of times during the movie, Will caught me looking at him, but quickly turned his gaze back to the movie. I'm sure he thought it would be awkward to say something.

The movie ended a couple of hours later. It was around 9pm.

"Let's go listen to some music in my room," Will said, breaking the long silence. Normally even during a movie, we would yell out things and make comments, but not tonight. It's not as though the activities themselves were cause for suspicion, as watching movies and listening to music were things we did all the time. It was more the way he seemed to keep finding things to do that would prevent us from talking and his overall behavior that concerned me. Something was definitely wrong, and I needed to talk to him before we got too tired and Will decided to use that as an excuse to not have a real conversation the whole evening.

We walked back to his room. Will carried the Star Wars VHS he had rewound and ejected from the VCR back with him. I closed the door to his room.

"Will, can we talk?" I asked.

Will was on his knees facing away from me as he perused his growing record collection. "Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"What's bothering you? You've been acting weird since we left the mansion. I know we all saw some strange stuff in there, and I know we're all concerned about Lucas, but it seems to have affected you more than anyone else."

Will turned around and frowned. "N-nothing," he lied. "I'm fine."

"Will. Please talk to me. I don't like seeing you like this."

"Like what? I told you I'm fine."

"Is that why you've barely said anything to me this whole evening?" I questioned him. "You're never this quiet. And you were crying earlier back at the mansion. I just want to help you."

Will stood up. "Stop it."

"Stop what?" I asked him.

"Stop treating me like everyone else does! Like there's something wrong with me," he snapped.

"What are you talking about?"

"You and Mike are usually the only two people in the party that never treat me like I'm about to break, but now I can't even count on that," Will said angrily.

I felt incredibly guilty in this moment. Normally I wouldn't confront Will about his thoughts or emotions regarding Upside-Down related trauma and would just listen whenever he was ready to talk about them, but I really hated seeing him like this, and it made me really uncomfortable that he was suddenly pretending everything was fine when it wasn't. "I'm sorry, Will. I thought talking through your feelings would help." Will was silent, his eyes toward the floor. I tried another approach. "Do you want to know what I saw in the mansion?"

Will looked up. "Sure, I guess," he said softly. I motioned him to sit down.

As we sat on the edge of his bed, I told him everything I saw, from the winding hallway to the door calling for me, to the baseball game with the creepy umpire who turned out to be something more sinister. I told Will about how he was in the stands and then disappeared when I got hit by a pitch and what the umpire said to me afterward.

Will took a moment to absorb my story. "I don't understand. Why do you care so much what I think about you?" he questioned me.

Shit, I thought. In my attempt to help him feel more comfortable sharing his vision, I had revealed a little too much about mine. I didn't think through what conclusions he might draw from it. What was I supposed to say? That I've secretly had a crush on him for years? I settled for playing dumb. "I don't know," I lied.

"Friends don't lie," Will said solemnly. Of course he saw through that.

A pang of nausea hit me. "I think I'm going to throw up," I blurted out before running out of the room to the bathroom next door, shutting the door behind me. I opened the toilet bowl cover and leaned over the toilet. I gagged, but nothing came out. My stomach was empty.

Frustrated that my nausea couldn't be cured by vomiting, I sank to the floor. Will's question was impossible for me to answer without telling him how I really felt about him. That was the one thing I could never do. I didn't want to open myself up to that kind of hurt, but I also didn't want to lie to my best friend. Overwhelmed by my predicament, I started crying. Tears rolled down my face as I allowed myself this emotional release in the confines of Will's bathroom.

Will knocked on the door. "Robert? Are you ok?" he asked, unaware at first that I was crying.

I continued to cry and sniffle.

"Are you crying?"

I didn't answer.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"It's unlocked," I said between sniffles.

He opened the door and saw me sitting against his bathtub, a complete blubbering mess. He walked over and sat down on the floor next to me.

"What's wrong?" Will asked. "I know you get sick when you're

nervous about something, but you don't usually cry too." God he's so observant — one of the many things I loved about him.

"I can't tell you," I sobbed.

"Why?"

"You'll hate me."

"I could never hate you," Will said. He paused. "My question after your story? That's what's making you nervous, isn't it?"

I nodded.

Will sighed. "If you answer my question, I'll tell you about my vision."

I wiped my eyes. "You have to promise my answer won't ruin our friendship."

"I promise. So tell me, Robert, why do you care so much what I think about you?"

There was no backing out now. I had to answer him, even though it made me sick to my stomach. My heart was racing as I took a deep breath, my eyes still watery. "Because I love you, Will. I always have. Ever since that day in the first grade when I forgot to bring my lunch to school, and you shared your sandwich with me even though we weren't friends yet. You told me you couldn't bear to see a classmate go hungry. It was the most generous thing anyone had ever done for me, and after that I knew you were special. I didn't really know what it meant to love someone like that back then, but I do now."

Will looked at me, teary eyed. "You love me?" His voice broke.

"Yes. If you don't want to be friends anymore, I understand," I sniffled as I buried my head in my lap, scared to see his reaction to my confession.

Will laughed lightly. "You have no idea how much of a relief it is to hear you say that."

"Why?" I asked, lifting my head up.

Will cracked a smile. "Because I love you too, Robert. I still think sharing my sandwich with you was the best thing I've ever done because it brought us together."

I wasn't prepared for this answer. All these years of pining for Will, and he had loved me all along. If only we had figured this out sooner. Not knowing what to say, I leaned in and kissed him on the lips. At first he was startled, but then he reciprocated. He tasted so, Will. It was a taste I never wanted out of my mouth.

After a few seconds, we pulled apart.

"I'm sorry... that was rash of me," I apologized.

"No, it was really nice. It felt right, kissing you."

I couldn't help but smile as I gazed into his hazel eyes and he gazed back into my darker brown eyes.

"All those times I caught you staring at me, and I never even realized why. I feel like such an idiot," Will sighed. "Especially since I would catch myself staring at you too. I didn't really know what it meant until around the time the Demogorgon got me, but somewhere deep down I always knew I loved you...as more than a friend. I was just too stubborn to believe you could actually feel the same way."

For me it was obvious why someone would love Will. He had a big heart, was very generous, smart, artistic, and handsome. No, he was beautiful. And to top it off, he had a great sense of humor. I on the other hand, well I wasn't sure what he saw in me. "Why do you love me so much? I'm not bold like Mike, or cool like Lucas or even funny like Dustin." I asked. "How could I possibly be good enough for you?"

"You don't have to be like them. You're you. You're kind, thoughtful and creative. You're always thinking outside the box. Even in our D&D games, you find ways to bend the rules without actually breaking them. I guess I admire that. You have these big beautiful brown eyes that match your dark brown hair and a cute little mole just right of your nose. And you have the biggest smile out of all of us." My cheeks were crimson from hearing him describe me like this. "You're always just been there for me, especially after everyone

started coupling up. Also you're the only one in the party who actually cares about the music I listen to. You're a real catch, Robert, and don't ever think otherwise." I smiled sheepishly. "There's that smile!" he said. He sighed and looked away. "Ok, I'll tell you what I saw."

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five: The Shadow Man

Will began to describe his vision as we sat on the floor of his bathroom:

There was a door that called out to me too, and a long seemingly never-ending hallway like you said. I opened the door and stepped into the Upside Down. The mansion was rotting and our bikes outside were scraps. I walked around into the decayed garden in the back, and a shadow man was standing there. He wore a black robe and had dark skin. He looked middle-aged, just like you described him.

"Good to see you again, Will" he said. I stopped cold. This man I had never seen before knew me, and for some reason I felt like I knew him too.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"So quick to forget me? We were together once, but you made it too inhospitable for me. I like it cold, remember?"

I gasped. It couldn't be.

"Yes, now you know who I am," the shadow man said, smiling menacingly.

"You can't hurt me or my friends anymore. El locked you in the Upside Down."

"It is true that she locked me there, but a part of me was able to stay in your world after I left your body, leaving me stuck between the two dimensions. This dilapidated mansion seemed like a good place to settle for a while until I figured out how to fully break through to your world. Then you kids came along with your science experiment friend, and now I have the perfect opportunity to break free once and for all."

I couldn't speak. I tried to say something but no words would come out.

"You don't have to speak. I know your mind inside and out. I know all about your secret feelings for your friend, Robert, for example. Feelings

that you know will never be returned, but you torture yourself with them anyway. The same feelings that get you called "fairy" by school yard kids and "queer" by your own father, who ending up abandoning you anyway. Let's face it, you're weak without me. Together we were a force to be reckoned with. You were my eyes and ears. We killed those soldiers and scientists who tried to stop us. You could join me again, and we would conquer everything your dimension has to offer. Or you could stay here trapped in your own mind. Your choice."

I heard another voice. "Run!" It was El. She was standing behind me. She must have contacted me through the void. She grabbed my hand and we ran back into the mansion and through the door I had gone through.

"You can't run forever. You'll be back. I guarantee it," the shadow man said, looking unconcerned.

That was the last thing I remember hearing and seeing before I was back in the mansion with everyone else.

I absorbed his story, realizing now why he didn't want to tell anyone about it. It was so deeply personal, just like my vision. This shadow man was using our own minds against us.

The trauma of recounting his vision put Will on the verge of tears. "I thought it was over. I thought I was free. But he came back and violated my mind again. And I just stood there." He was crying now. I hugged him tight. "The worst part is I almost wanted to let him back in. I actually considered it. At least then I wouldn't have had to endure the pain I felt every day wishing we could be something more but sure it would never happen. Maybe he was right. Maybe I am weak."

I put my hands on his shoulders and looked him square in the face. "No. You're the strongest, most resilient person I know. You've gone through so much, and you're still here despite it all."

"And now he has Lucas. None of this would've happened if I hadn't tried to confront the Mind Flayer last Halloween," Will sobbed. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"Hey, that's *not* your fault," I assured him. "You've done everything

right. You didn't let it back in, and now we know what we're up against." He looked up at me with his big watery eyes. "We'll get Lucas back, just like we got you back, twice. It must be weird being in the rescue party for once, huh?" I joked. He put on a little smile and nodded.

"Thanks for telling me your vision," he said.

I smiled. "It must seem so stupid to you now."

"Yeah, you playing baseball well? As if!" he giggled.

"Haha. Very funny." I was glad to see him joking around like we used to. "I'm glad you told me yours too. Just think, we'd be sitting here listening to The Talking Heads totally ignorant that we were in love with each other if it wasn't for the shadow man and that mansion." I put my hand on his: "Now I know we can get through this, because we're stronger together."

Will smiled. "Yeah, stronger together."

"You know, I'm actually kind of hungry now," I admitted.

"Me too," Will agreed. "Let's grab some snacks." I nodded. It was late now, around 11pm. Will quietly opened the door, and we tiptoed into the kitchen, not wanting Will's mom to catch us being up this late. Will opened the pantry door and grabbed a bag of chips and some Reese's Pieces. I got a couple of cans of root beer out of the fridge.

"What are you two lovebirds doing up?" Will and I almost dropped our snacks as we jumped back in shock to see Jonathan standing in the hall facing us with a big grin plastered all over his face.

"L-lovebirds? I don't know what you're talking about," Will stammered.

"I said lugheads, not lovebirds," Jonathan corrected his brother. "Enjoy your snacks. See you in the morning." He walked back to his room with a smirk.

"I'm pretty sure he said, 'lovebirds,'" I said.

"You think he knows?" Will asked in a hushed tone. "Were we that loud?"

"Even if he does, I'm sure he doesn't care. I'm more worried about what we're going to tell the party," I said softly. "Today we were two supposedly straight members, and tomorrow we'll be gay for each other."

"Let's go back to my room, so we can eat these snacks already!" Will complained, changing the subject.

I laughed and nodded. We crept back to his room and put our snacks down on the bed and the soda cans on his nightstand. We started snacking and picked up our conversation from the kitchen.

"Seriously though, what are we going to tell the party?" I asked him. Honestly, telling the party I was gay and dating Will Byers now scared me a bit. There was safety in the others not knowing. The topic of homosexuality never really came up in our group, so I wasn't sure how they'd take it. I knew Hawkins, Indiana wasn't the most accepting place, though. There was plenty of homophobia to go around. In another universe where I didn't have a crush on Will, I might have told the party I was gay. But in this one, being gay and loving Will were inextricably tied in my mind. Of course Will had been the last person I wanted to tell because I thought if I told him that he would instantly figure out my feelings for him. Now that was moot, and I felt better knowing I wouldn't have to tell them alone.

"Do we have to tell them?" Will asked.

"I think we should."

"You think they're going to be ok with it... with us?"

"I hope so. Lucas may be the only person who might not take it as well, but he's not even around at the moment," I replied.

"Why Lucas?"

"Well you weren't around when we first met El, but he wasn't the most accepting of her at first."

"But he basically led the whole 'recruit Max into the party' movement...oh." Will laughed, recognizing the real reason behind that. "Maybe we should just tell Mike first," he suggested. "I'm sure he'd understand, even if the others don't." Mike was Will's oldest friend, and they held a special bond. "Besides, I feel really guilty for keeping this secret from him. I usually tell him everything."

"If we tell everyone, it's like ripping off the band-aid quickly. It'll hurt for a bit, and then it's done. Telling just Mike is like slowly peeling it off, extending the discomfort for longer. Eventually everyone is going to find out, so better to rip off the band-aid," I argued.

"Wow, what an analogy," Will snarked. I stuck my tongue out at him. "I guess it's the right thing to do, since it's harder."

I grabbed his hands. They were really soft. "It'll be ok, Will," I assured him. "I'm scared too, but we'll get through it together."

He gazed at me. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"No, you are," I beamed.

"Seriously though, how did you get so good at pep talks?"

"I learned from the best," I winked at him.

"Me? Seriously?"

"No, Mike," I teased.

Will hit me lightly on my left arm. "Wow, Robert."

"Hey, careful. I just got hit there by a fastball earlier, remember?"

Will groaned. "Oh my god!" Suddenly he pinned me down on top of his bed. We started to wrestle playfully, giggling as our gangly limbs flailed around. Deciding I'd had enough rolling around, I grabbed him and pulled him close so our noses were touching. He understood what I wanted and our lips met for the second time this evening. This time our tongues danced around as we explored each others' mouths. It was a moment of pure bliss and passion that I never wanted to end.

"Still hungry?" he smirked.

"No, I think I'm satisfied now," I replied with my own smirk.

"I'm gonna go brush my teeth, it's getting late." Will got up and left the room. I grabbed my backpack and pulled out my pajamas and toothbrush, laying them both on the bed. I changed out of my t-shirt and jeans and into my pajamas while Will was brushing his teeth in the bathroom. When he got back, I left his room to brush my teeth. He had changed into his pajamas while I was gone. I decided to ask him something a little forward.

"Hey, Will? Can I sleep on your bed with you?"

Will looked into my dark brown eyes. "Of course, silly! I was gonna offer you anyway." I thanked him with a grin. Other times I'd been over, I would sleep on the floor with a sleeping bag he kept in his closet for guests. I was finally getting an upgrade!

We climbed into his bed, and pulled the covers over us. He shut off his table lamp, leaving the room in darkness with only the moonlight coming through the curtains.

"I'm really glad you're here," Will murmured.

"Me too. Goodnight, Will." I gave him a peck on the lips and cuddled up next to him. The warmth of his body against mine was incredibly soothing.

"Goodnight, Robert," he mumbled before drifting off to sleep.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter Six: The Plan

The following morning, the party was assembled in the Wheeler residence basement, the go-to hangout where we played Dungeons and Dragons and El had her pillow fort. Lucas was noticeably absent. His parents had him in a local hospital to help keep him sustained while doctors tried to determine the cause of his supposed coma. We were here to meet and determine a plan for how to rescue Lucas, because we knew the doctors weren't going to be able to do anything about the shadow man.

"I'm ready to tell you all about my vision," Will announced. Everyone but me looked shocked at his sudden change of heart. He told them about how he saw into the Upside Down and revealed who the shadow man was, conspicuously leaving out some details revealing his crush on me. The other party members' faces shifted from attentive to horrified. Wanting to end on a more positive note, he continued on: "There's more," he said. "The shadow man. He knows something about me. Something I didn't want to tell you all before now."

"What is it? You can tell us," Mike said.

Will swallowed. "I'm gay and in love with Robert."

"And I love him back, and we're together now," I blurted out, grabbing Will's hand. "We found out when we told each other our visions last night."

"Oh my god, finally!" Dustin exclaimed. "I was starting to think you two would never figure it out."

"What? You knew?" Will and I said, shocked.

"Duh. You two are always looking at each other like, 'Oh Robert! Oh Will! I love you so much! No, I love you!'" Dustin mocked. Will and I groaned at our friend mocking us. "It's that electricity Steve told me about — it's all over you two."

"It was pretty obvious after a while," Mike added. Will and I stared at Mike, shocked that he also knew.

"Yup," Max said. El nodded in agreement. So everyone had already figured it out but us. That made me feel really stupid and a little angry.

"Why did none of you say anything to either of us? Do you know how painful it's been to keep this secret?" I demanded.

"We figured you or Will would say something to one of us when you were ready to talk about it." Max said. "Honestly I'm sorry neither of you felt comfortable talking to us."

Her apology not only made me feel incredibly guilty, but made me realize that Max would have been the perfect person to share my secret feelings for Will with. She had just enough history with the group that she understood how we all operated, but also was a recent enough addition that prior history wouldn't have played into our interactions as much, so there'd be fewer expectations.

"No, I'm sorry, Max," I said. "I shouldn't have felt like I needed to hide such a huge secret from you or anyone else in the party."

Max hugged me. "If you ever need to talk about things, I'm here."

"Me too," El said. "We can have sleepovers and talk about our relationships like those soap operas on TV."

I laughed. "Sounds like plan."

"Anything to get me out of my house," Max said. Max's home life was decidedly the worst of the group. Her father was an abusive piece of shit and Billy took it out on his step-sister. Her mother just enabled her husband, too afraid to stand up to him.

"And you guys are ok with us, being, you know?" Will asked, looking particularly at Mike.

Mike understood Will's look. They knew each other so well they could have a whole conversation just from their expressions. "Will, no matter who you like, you're still my best friend and I'll support you

no matter what." With teary eyes, Will hugged Mike, who hugged him back. "And that goes for you too, Robert," he said looking at me now. He hugged me, and I hugged him back. I think the last time Mike and I shared a hug was back when El rescued us from Troy and James at the quarry. Recently I had felt myself growing more distant from Mike. I told myself it was because he and El spent a lot of time together and he probably didn't have time for me, yet at the same time I never found myself making the effort to try to hang out with him alone like we used to back before the fall of '83. My embrace with Mike made me realize how much I've missed him. I know that's a weird thing to say about someone you see every day, but I only ever really hung out with him anymore in the context of the larger party.

"Alright, we all support this and care yada yada yada. Can we get back to the more pressing issue of Lucas being taken by the shadow man who apparently is now actually the Mind Flayer?" Dustin asked. Dustin wasn't the most sentimental type, but I knew he was happy for Will and me regardless.

Mike nodded. "Alright, let's recap what we know. Lucas is trapped by the shadow man inside his own mind. His parents are keeping him in the hospital, and telling them about what's really going on with him is out of the question. Basically we need to find a way to get him away from the hospital and then actually free him. Any ideas?"

"Like Dustin said earlier, let's just burn it out of him. Worked for Will," Max said.

I shook my head. "I don't think it's actually inside Lucas. Remember when the Mind Flayer was in Will, Will was awake, and he was making him spy on us. Why would he want Lucas to be unconscious? He can't spy on us if he's not awake."

"If he's not inside him, then he must still be in the mansion," Dustin said.

"Why would he trap Lucas and then just stay there? Something's sketchy about all this," Max said.

"He told Robert and me that we'd be back. I didn't really understand

why it said that until now. I think he knows we have to go back to the mansion in order to rescue Lucas," Will said.

"You want us to just walk right back into what's obviously going to be a trap?" Dustin asked Will incredulously.

"I think Will's right. He told me that too. But how do we get Lucas out once we're there?" Mike said.

"Same way I got you all out of your visions," El said.

"Wait, that must be what the shadow man wants. El closed the gate, and he knows that. If El tries to contact Lucas inside his vision again, he'll spring whatever trap he has in store for her and make her open the gate again. Then we'd all be screwed," Dustin said.

"It's too dangerous, El," Will said.

"What if there was some way for all of us to go with her, like one shared vision? It wouldn't expect that," I suggested.

Dustin looked at me like I was a complete idiot. "That is so completely..."

"Genius!" Mike interrupted. "With all of us together he wouldn't stand a chance."

"How would that even work? In case you haven't noticed, we're not all gifted with psychic powers like El," Max said.

"I think the mansion made me stronger. Normally people can't see or hear me when I make contact through the Void. But there you all did," El answered.

"The mansion must be like some sort of power amplifier. If it made us able hear El in our visions, maybe it can allow El to connect all of us inside Lucas's vision," Mike reasoned.

"I think our party has officially reached peak craziness," Max said, rolling her eyes.

"We still have to figure out how to get Lucas out of the hospital,"

Dustin said. "And even if we do, how would we get him back to the mansion on our bikes?"

"I can get him out. But it might get messy," El said.

"Like stealing Eggos from the grocery store messy or bad men at school messy?" Dustin asked.

"Obviously the former, Dustin," Mike answered, looking at him like he couldn't believe he would actually ask that.

"That still doesn't answer my question of how we get Lucas back to the mansion?" Dustin reiterated.

"Why don't we just call Hopper?" I asked.

"Because he told us to stay away from there. He'd never let us go," El said.

"Let's just call your other mom, Dustin," Max said.

"Who Steve?" Dustin asked.

We laughed at him accidentally acknowledging Steve as his other mom.

Dustin's face turned red. "He's not my other mom! He's just a friend who happens to be older and give really good advice, sometimes about hair."

"So that explains your hair at the Snowball dance," I laughed.

"You know you liked it." He sighed. "Fine, I'll call Steve," Dustin acquiesced. "But we won't all fit in his car."

"I'll get Jonathan to drive the rest of us," Will said. "His shift at the store ends later this afternoon."

"Who's going with El to get Lucas?" I asked.

"I'll go," Dustin said. "I'll sweet talk our way in. The nurses won't know what hit them." He did his super annoying purr thing.

"Oh my god, stop doing that!" I groaned.

"Me too. Wouldn't want to miss Operation: Hospital Breakout," Max said, coining the name. "Also I miss him," she said more seriously. Max must have been extremely distraught over her boyfriend being in his current predicament. Still she seemed to do her best not to show it.

"Ok, Robert, Mike and I will go back to my place and wait for your signal to head to the mansion," Will said.

"So it's a plan. Keep your Supercoms handy. We're gonna need them," Mike said. "Hands in."

We put our right hands in the middle of the table and stacked them.

"1, 2, 3, break!"

7. Chapter 7

Chapter Seven: The Breakout

Steve was standing outside of his car talking to Dustin, El, and Max in front of Dustin's house.

"Let me get this straight. You guys went into some random mansion in the woods that gave you hallucinations and didn't bring me along to keep you all in line?" Steve asked.

"We're not little kids. We don't need supervision," Dustin whined.

"Well, clearly you do since you guys are so good at finding dangerous shit way out of your league," Steve retorted. Dustin had no comeback. "So what, now you want me to help you break Sinclair out of the hospital?"

"Yes," El said.

"We need a getaway driver," Max said.

"Great, I'll add that to my resume next to babysitter and monster hunter," Steve said.

"Can we just go already?" Dustin asked with an annoyed tone.

Steve motioned them to get in the car and got back in the driver's seat. He obviously cared about our party, but sometimes he wasn't sure why he put up with our crap.

Max turned on her walkie talkie. "Mike come in, this is Max. Operation: Hospital Breakout is a go. Over." Max was really getting into the walkie talkie lingo.

Mike was sitting with Will and me in the Byers living room.

"This is Mike, copy that. We'll wait for your signal to head out to the mansion. Over and out."

"Now we wait," I said. I was a little disappointed I wasn't going to get

to help with the breakout, but I was with Will, and I cared about that more.

"So, uh, how are things with you two, now that you're together and all?" Mike asked, innocently. I could tell he didn't know what else to say and was trying to make conversation. I could imagine how weird it must be for two of your best friends growing up to suddenly be dating each other, especially when they were both boys.

"Good, I guess," Will replied with a small smile. I nodded.

"I'm happy you two figured things out," Mike said.

"Me too," I said, looking at Will. He looked back at me with a smile and winked. I melted from how adorable he was in that moment.

Steve pulled up at the hospital and parked. The four got out of the car and walked inside and up to the front desk.

"Hi, who are you visiting today?" The receptionist asked the group. She was a middle-aged woman with a blonde ponytail, small-rimmed glasses, and pastel dress.

"Lucas Sinclair," Steve answered. "We're his friends."

"Let me see. Oh, I'm afraid he's not taking visitors outside of immediate family members at the moment."

El glared at the receptionist. Steve put a hand in front of her.

"It's ok. His parents gave us permission," Steve lied.

"I'm sorry, his file says immediate family only, so I still can't let you in," the receptionist frowned.

Steve pulled El right up to the desk. "You know who this is?" The receptionist shook her head. "She's the chief's daughter. Do you really want to piss off Chief Hopper by not letting his daughter see her friend in the hospital?" The receptionist shook her head again and sighed.

"Look I can see you all care deeply for the Sinclair boy. I'll let you in, but no funny business. His room number is 141." She gave them visitor stickers, which they stuck on their shirts. They walked past the desk and out of earshot, Steve turned to El and said, "See? Not so hard. No powers required."

"Hmmp" El retorted.

"Ok rooms 101-130 are to the left, and rooms 131-160 are to the right," Dustin said, reading the sign on the wall.

"Right it is," Max said.

They strutted down the hall until they reached 141. Max opened the door.

Jonathan and Nancy were en route to the Byers residence. Jonathan was driving while Nancy sat in the passenger seat.

"Jonathan, what's wrong?" Nancy asked.

"What do you mean?" Jonathan replied.

"It's just...you look worried about something," she said.

"I've just been thinking... about Will," he admitted.

"Did he have another episode? I thought he had gotten better," she asked.

"No it's not that. He and Robert had a sleepover last night, and I saw them in the kitchen really late getting snacks. When I said hi to them, they seemed really nervous, like they were hiding something."

"I'm sure they were just not expecting you to still be up."

"It's not just that. I made a joke. I called them 'lugheads', but Will thought I said, 'lovebirds'. Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but those two have been spending a lot of time alone together recently, and I see the way he talks about him. It's different from his other friends. Even Mike. You don't think that Will could be...you know?"

"Gay? It's possible. Has he ever asked you for advice about girls?"

"You know who you're talking to, right?" Jonathan said dryly.

"Fair enough," Nancy replied.

"If he is, why would he hide it from me?"

"Maybe he isn't so sure himself. He's still pretty young."

Jonathan nodded. They pulled up in front of his house. He parked his Ford LTD. They got out of the car and walked inside. They went down the hall toward the living room. Will was sitting with Mike and me.

"Mike. Wasn't expecting to see you here," Nancy said. "Hi Robert. Hey Will."

"Hi Nancy." I waved at her awkwardly. Will looked up and smiled at her politely.

"Nancy, go home, we need Jonathan. It's super important," Mike blurted out.

"Excuse me?" Nancy glared at her little brother.

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked.

"We're rescuing Lucas, and we need you to drive us to a mansion in the woods," Mike explained.

"Did you just say, 'mansion?'" Nancy asked."

"Yeah, are you deaf?" Mike mocked his older sister.

"I thought Lucas was in the hospital," Jonathan said.

"He is, or he won't be for much longer," I jumped in.

"The rest of the party is working on that right now," Will added.

"Why don't you just start from the beginning?" Jonathan said.

"And whatever this is all about, I'm coming along whether you like it or not" Nancy said.

Mike sighed. "Fine." He explained everything that happened yesterday. Will and I didn't feel like reliving everything again, so we excused ourselves and went to his room to hang out. Will closed the door behind him.

"I love sneaking off with you," I said.

"It's hardly sneaking, but yeah me too," he giggled. "Oh I just remembered. Nancy gave Jonathan a record a couple of weeks ago with some new single on it. I don't really know the band, but we can give it a listen. I stole it from his room."

"You're so cute when you're mischievous," I smirked. He gave me a sly grin back.

He bent down under his bed and lifted a stack of drawings he had been working on. Underneath was a record in a shiny new sleeve. It had "a-ha" in big red font and the song title read "Take On Me." Taking up most of the sleeve were three good looking young men in leather jackets and messy hair. Will pulled out the record itself. The top was beige in color with lines going across it horizontally like notebook paper. Jonathan had bought Will his own record player for his 14th birthday back in March so he wouldn't have to go in Jonathan's room every time he wanted to listen to music, which became much more frequent as time went on. Will took the record and placed it on the turntable which sat on his desk under the window.

The song started playing. A catchy beat started the song off and a synth keyboard started layering in after a few seconds. A little after fifteen-seconds, the main synth tune came in. Will and I smiled at each other as we bobbed our heads up and down to the beat.

"This is actually pretty catchy, like I could dance to this," I said.

"You wanna dance?" he asked.

"Uh, sure," I said sheepishly.

"C'mon it'll be fun!" He took my hands and off we went. We spun each other around and did that weird dance where you hold two fingers sideways and move them from in front of your eyes to the side. Pretty soon we were singing along as well, as the words were pretty simple.

"Take on me, take on me, take me on, take on me, I'll be gone, in a day or two!" we sang.

"The night of the Snowball dance..." I started to say. "I wish we could have danced together just like this."

"Me too. I came so close to asking you, before Jennifer Hayes swooped me away," he confessed to me. "I didn't want to make her feel bad. I heard how she cried at my 'funeral.'"

"You would have asked me, even with everyone around? You're a brave soul, Will Byers," I replied.

"I'm not brave. I chickened out," Will said remorsefully.

"Well, this is more fun than some stupid school dance anyway," I decided.

"Yeah, we can dance as crazy as we want to in my bedroom!" Will giggled.

Meanwhile in the living room, Mike had just finished the story, when suddenly the muffled sounds of "Take On Me" reverberated throughout the house.

Nancy perked up. She recognized the tune. "Isn't that the record I just gave you?" Nancy asked Jonathan.

"I don't know," Jonathan answered cluelessly.

"You mean you haven't listened to it yet?" Nancy glared at her boyfriend.

"I've been meaning to," Jonathan panicked. Mike started to laugh.

"Something funny, Mike?" Nancy turned to her brother. Her eyes

were daggers.

Mike attempted to hold back his laughter by holding a hand over his mouth. "No. Nothing's funny." After she turned away, he couldn't hold it back. He burst out laughing again. Jonathan let out a little chuckle.

"Ughhhhhh," Nancy groaned with disgust.

"Will must have taken it out of my room. I'll go talk to him." Jonathan said.

"I'll join you," Nancy said. She didn't want to sit around with her younger brother in someone else's house if she didn't have to. Nancy and Mike didn't have the best relationship, and they definitely got on each others' nerves, but at the end of the day, they did care about each other.

"I'll just be in here, by myself, waiting for the signal," Mike said, leaving an awkward pause between each phrase, as the two older teens got up and walked out of the room.

Jonathan reached Will's bedroom door. As he turned the knob, Jonathan spoke loudly over the blasting music, "What did I tell you about taking things out of my..." He stopped as his eyes landed on Will and me mid dance. I was holding Will's hand with an outstretched arm and Will was leaning backward. As soon as we saw him, I let go and Will almost fell backward, but he caught himself and we awkwardly separated and stiffened up. Nancy was behind him and my eyes met hers.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?" Jonathan asked. Will and I were too embarrassed to answer.

"You two were just dancing. Together," Nancy stated. "Is that something you guys all do now?"

"No, the party doesn't normally dance unless we're at a school dance or something," I said awkwardly.

"So, one of you is teaching the other how to dance..." Jonathan started.

"Are you two into each other?" Nancy blurted out, saying what they were both thinking.

"Yes," we answered. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing I wouldn't have to tiptoe around Jonathan or Nancy anymore.

Jonathan grabbed the record off the turntable and put it back in the sleeve. "Will, can I talk to you... alone?"

"Uh, sure," Will replied.

"Let's go to my room." He handed Will the record. "You can put that record right back where you found it, and next time ask if you want to borrow one."

"Ok I'm sorry," Will apologized.

They walked out, leaving Nancy and me in Will's room. Jonathan closed the door behind him.

I sat down on the edge of Will's bed. Nancy joined me. "It's been a while, since we really talked, hasn't it?" she said. I nodded. "Seems like not that long ago we were playing with Barbies in my bedroom."

"Yeah you were in fifth grade and I was in first. It was the year I met Mike and Will," I said.

"Simpler times. Before any of this crazy supernatural stuff started happening." Nancy recalled. I wasn't sure where this conversation was headed. Was she just feeling nostalgic or was there a point? She paused for a few seconds before continuing. "I just want to let you know you can talk to me about anything. You know I've always seen you as my second little brother."

I didn't have any siblings of my own. Nancy was the closest thing I had to one, so this gesture meant a lot to me.

"Thanks, Nancy," I replied. "I actually do have something to ask you."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Have you always known I was, you know?"

"Gay? If I had to guess I'd say there was a chance, but no, I didn't know. I knew you were different, not like the other boys Mike hangs out with, but then again Will is too in his own way. I don't think there's some obvious sign that makes someone gay. It's just part of who you are. No one can decide that for you."

"I'm a freak. Everyone else seems to think gay people are freaks."

"Screw what everyone else thinks! You're not a freak," she said vehemently.

"Yeah, I am. And so is Will. How can we not be freaks when we can't even be affectionate toward each other in public without getting called names or beat up? We have to hide our relationship from everyone but the party and now you and Jonathan."

"Maybe you are freaks," she said.

"What?" Her words shocked me.

"But so am I. And so is Jonathan. And so are all your other friends too. El has to conceal her powers from everyone else in town. We all have to pretend that the Upside Down doesn't exist and that there are no monsters waiting to jump out of there and kill us, like they did to Barb. It sucks. But we do it anyway. And it makes us freaks. But honestly I'd rather be a freak than normal because normal is boring, like my clueless dad." I laughed at her jab at her father because it was too true. She leaned a little closer to me. "Between you and me, I think you and Will were made for each other," she said softly.

"You really think so?" I asked earnestly.

"I know so. Promise me you'll hold that boy tight and never let him go."

I beamed. "I promise."

There he was. The boy whose mind was trapped by the shadow man. Lucas lay unconscious on a hospital bed wearing nothing but a hospital gown. He had an intravenous tube going into his right arm. His face was dry and lips chapped from the prolonged exposure to

cool air in his air-conditioned hospital room.

Max rushed over to his bedside. She stared at him silently for a moment before planting a kiss on his forehead. Talking to him, she said, "We're gonna get you out of here, stalker. And then we're gonna free you."

"Alright let's get this over with," Steve said with a sigh.

"There's a gurney right outside in the hallway we can push him with," Dustin suggested.

Max and El ran out to wheel the gurney into the room.

"Great, let's disconnect this tube and lift him up," Steve replied. Dustin pulled out the IV tube and he and Steve lifted him up. "Where's that gurney?!"

"Coming!" Max and El shouted back. They wheeled it into the room. Steve and Dustin placed Lucas on the gurney.

Just then a middle-aged female nurse walking by peeked in the room curious what all the commotion she was hearing. Her face changed from mild interest to shock.

"What are you doing with that patient?" the nurse demanded.

"Leaving," El said, moving the gurney with her mind toward the doorway.

The nurse shrieked and ran as the gurney rushed toward her.

"Help! Help! There's a crazy girl trying to break a patient out.

"Let's go guys! Move! Move!" Steve shouted at the group.

El pushed the gurney down the hall ahead of them as they sprinted after it back toward the entrance.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Dustin yelled as they ran.

"This is awesome!" Max beamed at El. El smiled back, happy to be

using her powers openly again.

Nurses and doctors dived and ran out of the way screaming as the gurney sped along almost ramming them.

"Somebody stop them!" another nurse shouted. It was no use. None of the hospital staff could catch up to the gurney. The gurney collided with the door to the lobby and went through. The group followed right behind it as visitors in the lobby shrieked at the runaway gurney carrying Lucas. It slowed down as Steve took manual control over it and they made it through the front door. They rushed over to Steve's BMW, and Steve opened the car. He and Dustin lifted Lucas off the gurney and put him in the right back seat. El and Max got in the back from the left side and Dustin took shotgun.

A police siren could be heard faintly. "We're not out of the woods yet!" Steve said as they sped off. As they drove away, Dustin's walkie talkie started making noise.

"Come in Dustin. This is Chief Hopper. I just got a report that Lucas has been napped from the hospital by a group of teenagers and was on a runaway gurney. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Everyone in the car froze.

"Don't answer it. Papa will kill me if he finds out I used my powers and am going back to the mansion," El pleaded.

"He probably already knows it was us. What else would cause a gurney to run away by itself? It's not like there are any slopes in the hospital," Max said.

"We need to contact Mike and give them the signal to head over to the mansion," Dustin said.

"On it," Max replied.

Steve continued driving out of downtown Hawkins and made his way toward our neighborhood. The siren became fainter as they sped away.

"Why didn't you tell me you were gay?"

Jonathan and Will were sitting on the edge of Jonathan's bed. On the wall next to the window was a poster for *Evil Dead*. His record player sat on top of an open cabinet just right of the window and in front of the poster. His room was slightly bigger than Will's and had fewer items lying around.

"I was going to..." Will whined.

"Before or after you possibly get killed when you journey into the center of Lucas's mind?" Jonathan hissed.

Will stiffened. "That's not fair."

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right? I'm your brother. Don't ever feel like you have to keep things like that from me."

The room was silent for a moment. "I didn't want to accept it at first. Robert is the only boy I've ever loved, and I didn't think he would ever love me back. So I kept it to myself," Will said solemnly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before you found out on your own."

Jonathan put his arm around Will. "I *am* happy for you, Will. Robert's a sweet kid," Jonathan said.

"The sweetest," Will said.

"But if he breaks your heart, I'll kill him."

"Jonathan!" Will groaned.

"Also, if you make it out of Lucas's head, you can have that record. It's not really my style anyway. You two looked like you enjoyed it a lot more," Jonathan offered.

"But Nancy gave it to you. What are you going to tell her?" Will asked.

"Don't worry about it."

"GUYS!" Mike came running to Jonathan's room. "I got the signal! Let's go!" Nancy and I hurried out of Will's room. Jonathan and Will followed Mike out of Jonathan's room. We all convened in the hallway by the front door.

"Well, don't just stand there. Let's move!" Mike shouted. We all shuffled out of the house and into Jonathan's car. Nancy sat in the front seat and Mike, Will and I in the back seat. Mike lifted the antenna up on his walkie-talkie and pressed the talk button. "Come in Max!"

"I'm here. What's your status, over?" Max replied through the radio.

"We're on our way over right now. Should be about 10 minutes or so. Over"

"We'll be there in five. See you in a bit. Over and out."

I turned to Will, who was sitting to my right. "Do you think we're actually going to be able to get inside Lucas's vision?" I asked.

He turned away from the window and looked at me. "I don't know. But we have to hope." I nodded in agreement and then leaned my head on his shoulder. He leaned his head back toward me. I could feel his soft hair against my head. It smelled really nice, like a combination of citrus and ocean. His hand met mine, and we locked fingers. I was so comfortable I could sleep but I knew we'd be there soon, so I didn't bother and just relaxed in our embrace.

We pulled up to mansion, and Steve's car was there. They all got out of his car when they saw us. We parked behind them and got out of Jonathan's car.

Steve stared at Nancy, likely wondering what she was doing here with us. "They roped you into this too?" he asked her.

"No, I wanted to come," Nancy replied coldly.

"Let's head inside already," Dustin interrupted.

Before we could decide who was going to carry Lucas, a siren blared and Chief Hopper's truck appeared. "No one move," Hopper said

through the intercom in his car. Hopper and Joyce got out of the truck, the latter of whom we were not expecting. "I told you guys to stay away from here. Should have known you wouldn't listen. Now can someone explain why you kidnapped Lucas from the hospital?"

"It was a rescue," Dustin corrected Hopper before Steve nudged him.

"Bringing him back here is the only way to wake him up," El said to her dad.

"Is that so?" Hopper said. "Well, you could have told me. I could have gotten him out of the hospital for you."

Steve glared at Dustin. "Really? You had me help break a kid out of the hospital for nothing?"

"It's not for nothing. He's here now, that's what's important. You have to admit it was pretty awesome, though," Dustin said with a smirk.

Steve sighed. "Yeah, I guess it was pretty cool."

"Can we just go inside already? He's obviously suffering in his vision," Max said.

"We can't just walk inside without some sort of plan. Last time we went in everyone got scattered and got lost in their own visions," I said.

Mike took charge of the plan. "No one go away from the main entry when we walk in. Also, not everyone should go inside. Party members only. Steve, Nancy, Jonathan, Mrs. Byers, and Chief Hopper, you can keep watch from outside. If something goes wrong, try to get us out."

"How will we know?" Nancy asked her younger brother.

"I'm not sure," Mike admitted. "Just trust your gut."

"I'm going inside," Hopper said. "No way in hell am I gonna leave you all in there alone."

"Then it's settled," Mike said.

"Will, please be safe. I won't lose you again," Joyce said to her son.

"I'll be back soon, I promise," Will said as they hugged.

Hopper carried Lucas while we all walked up to the front door. El opened the door this time and the rest of us shuffled inside as Hopper placed Lucas on the floor.

El leaned over him, put her handkerchief over her eyes, and placed a hand on his head. "Shut your eyes and put your hands over mine," she told us. "I don't know if this will work, but we have to try." We did as we were told. Nothing happened. "Reach out to Lucas. Focus on nothing but him," she commanded.

I focused as hard as I could on Lucas. I found myself thinking about his camouflage bandana and his wrist rocket —his inclination to point out when I or anyone else in the party said something dumb — him and Dustin arguing about *Back to the Future*. My mind was filled with everything Lucas. And then it went blank.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight: The Vision

My eyes opened to a blue sky peaking through foliage. The familiar scent of the Hawkins woods met my nose. I was in Hawkins, but I wasn't sure where. Once I stood up, I realized I was alone. Did the plan not work? Was I somehow in my own vision and not Lucas's? As I scanned my surroundings, I saw a chained fence ahead of me. I jogged lightly toward it, eager to figure out where exactly I was.

As soon as I passed the trees leading up to the fence, I gulped. The sign on the fence read, "Hawkins National Laboratory." I craned my neck up at the most massive building in Hawkins. From my experience with Will and Mike in the lab during the time Will was possessed, I was well aware of it being the source of all the supernatural stuff that's occurred, as well as being the place the bad men worked.

Something about the place seemed different. Hawkins Lab had permanently shut down shortly after El closed the gate, but now it didn't look derelict. A generator hummed somewhere nearby. Vans like the one El flipped over were parked outside.

"Robert!" An all too familiar voice called out, interrupting my train of thought. A short teen with a brown bowl cut stepped out from behind some trees to my rear. It was Will, but was he real or just part of a vision?

"How do I know you're real?" I questioned him. He was wearing the same clothes as he had on earlier, but in case this was some sort of trap, I had to be on my guard, especially considering no one else had woken up with me.

He walked up to my face and kissed my lips. I kissed back. After a few seconds, he pulled away. "Is that real enough for you?" he asked me with a smirk.

"Good to see you too," I laughed.

Will became serious. "Where's everyone else?"

"I don't know. But I have the sense we need to look inside." I looked up at the tall cross-shaped building in front of us.

"You think Lucas is in there too?" he asked.

"Maybe," I replied. "I'm glad you found me. I wasn't sure whether the plan had worked or not when I woke up by myself. For second, I thought maybe this was in my head instead of Lucas's."

"Me too," he agreed.

"I'm sure the others are nearby," I assured him. "It'd be nice to find them before we go inside. Who knows what might be waiting for us in there?"

"Don't remind me," Will said. "This isn't exactly my favorite place in the world." Of course that was an understatement, if I had ever heard one. In Hawkins Lab, beside being the subject of Doctor Owens' many examinations, he had also inadvertently caused the death of a number of soldiers and staff as well as lost a potential stepdad in Bob Newby.

"C'mon let's find a way through the gate," I said. We scaled the fence, moving right of where we had been standing. Not too far along, I spotted a hole in the fence, big enough for someone to crawl through. "Someone made this hole," I observed.

"I bet it was Lucas," Will said. "Looks too small for an adult."

"Sorry to interrupt your alone time or whatever, but yeah, I'm here!" a girl called out from behind us. We turned around, startled. It was Max. We breathed a sigh of relief.

"Max!" Will shouted.

"Cool, now we're just missing half of us," I said as Max walked over to us.

"Somehow we must have all landed separately," Will discerned. "Maybe we all drifted in at different times."

"That makes sense," I replied. "Max, we found this hole in the fence. We think Lucas may have made it."

"So what are we waiting for? Let's go through it and track him down," Max decided.

She crawled through. Will went through next, followed by me. Once we all made it through, we starting walking across the parking lot. Will and I held hands. When we got close to the white vans, we suddenly heard the sound of someone scampering between the vans. Then it stopped.

"Hello?" I called out before Max put her hand over my mouth.

"Quiet! What if it's a demodog?"

I pulled her hand away from my mouth. "It's not a demodog."

"Lucas?!" Will yelled optimistically.

"We know you're there, whoever you are," Max shouted.

A skinny black teen wearing a camouflage bandana cautiously stepped out from between two of the vans.

"Stalker!" Max cried.

"Mad Max! It's you. It's really you," he said, running toward her. They embraced and kissed each other. He then hugged me and Will. He seemed not to notice that Will and I had been holding hands. "I don't understand. I've been trying to rescue you all, but now you're out here?"

"What do you mean, rescue us?" I asked him.

"The bad men took everyone: Mike, Will, Dustin, El, Max, and you. I've been trying to rescue you but I always end up short. I get drugged and sent home. Then I have to start from scratch, piecing together where you all went off to. After a while, I started remembering my failed attempts and leaving myself clues to make sure I stayed on track."

"The hole in the fence..." Will said.

"Right," Lucas acknowledged.

"Not to blow your mind or anything, but this place isn't real. We're inside your mind, and we actually came to rescue you," Max said.

Lucas turned to his girlfriend. "Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?" Lucas asked Max incredulously.

"In case you forgot, you're the one that tried to convince me all the Upside Down stuff existed in the first place," Max reminded him.

"We're actually inside the mansion. Remember we went to check it out?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but then we left, and the bad men got you shortly afterward," Lucas replied.

"Lucas, the bad men haven't been in Hawkins Lab for months. It's closed down," Will said with a frown.

Lucas looked increasingly anxious. "That doesn't make sense. They're in there now...I've seen them...I've seen you, all trapped."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "I know it sounds crazy, but we all had visions like this before we woke up. It feels real, but there's always something off or uncanny about it."

"El couldn't wake you up," Max said. "Your parents put you in the hospital. We broke you out and brought you back to the mansion so we could enter your vision and bring you back."

Lucas shook his head. "You mean to tell me I've been stuck in a loop trying to rescue you, but you were never really here?"

We nodded. Lucas put up his hands and looked up at the sky in frustration.

"So where are the others?" he asked.

"We're trying to figure that out ourselves," Will answered. "We all

landed separately. It was just a coincidence that the three of us found each other so quickly."

"We were gonna try and look inside the lab for them," I said.

"Hell no! You guys didn't listen when I said we shouldn't go down that path to the mansion, and now look at what happened. If this really is in my head, we're doing this my way. We stay outside," Lucas commanded us.

"Alright, stalker, where to?" Max asked her boyfriend.

"Let's swing around the opposite side by the main entrance," Lucas suggested. "Maybe they landed on the other side from you three."

"Sounds good," Will said.

"Aye, aye captain," I muttered out of his earshot. Will glared at me, obviously hearing me mock our friend. I gave him a pouty face. His serious face shifted to a smirk. I started laughing, and he joined in.

"Hey! What's so funny?" Lucas demanded.

"Nothing," Will and I said. We swiftly looked back at each other as we held in our giggles.

"C'mon let's go," Max said rolling her eyes knowingly at us.

We walked around to the front of the building. It was too quiet. No sign of Mike, El or Dustin.

"Wouldn't they have at least made it to the entrance of the building by this point?" Max asked the group.

"Maybe they didn't even make the trip," I suggested.

"No, they're around here somewhere. I just know it," Will said.

"If they're not outside, then the bad men have them," Lucas said.

"You mean the ones that don't actually exist, right?" I reminded him.

"You know you keep saying this stuff, but how do I even know *you*

guys are real and not just another projection of my mind?" Lucas asked us.

"Because we know the shadow man is controlling these visions, and if we were just projections he put in your mind, he wouldn't let us say that," I said.

"What shadow man?" Lucas looked confused.

"Well, he's got dark skin, like you. He looks like he's in his forties and has a creepy grin," Max said.

"Sometimes he's got this shadowy aura around him. He's appeared a little differently in everyone's visions," Will added.

Lucas stared off into space like he was recalling something. Suddenly he jerked. "I've seen him," he said gravely. "He's the head of the lab — the one who drugs me every time I fail to rescue you."

I had an epiphany. "Those drugs must be what's been preventing you from waking up. The roadblock El ran into trying to reach you," I realized.

Before anyone could say anything else, the glass door to the lab burst open. Mike, El and Dustin ran out, panting. They spotted us.

"Oh thank god!" Dustin yelled.

"Lucas!" Mike called out. They ran over to us.

"Of course they went inside without finding us first," Max said sarcastically.

"Classic Mike," I added snidely.

"What happened in there?" Will asked, as Mike, El and Dustin hugged Lucas.

"The shadow man is after us. We can't stay here long," El said.

"I'm so glad we're all together again," Lucas said. "You don't know how many times I've been trying to save you all."

The trio who missed his whole story looked confused.

"No time to explain if he's really on our tail. We need to find a way out," I said.

"May I make a suggestion?" A sinister but familiar voice called out from behind us. We turned around to see the shadow man standing in front of us. He was wearing a Hawkins lab coat. Several men in hazmat suits stood behind him carrying assault rifles.

"Leave my friends alone!" Lucas yelled at him.

"Lucas. I'm impressed. This is the farthest you've gotten to rescuing your friends. And this time the real ones showed up."

"This time, we're going to get out of here for good," Lucas hissed.

"Well, that's the least I could do for you all bringing me Eleven."

A panic came across El's face. Dustin had been right about the shadow man wanting her.

"You're not taking El!" Mike screamed at the shadow man.

He laughed.

El lifted her hand and tensed her face, snapping the necks of the hazmat soldiers. They crumpled to the ground lifeless. A drop of blood rolled down from her left nostril.

"Is that supposed to impress me? They're just for show anyway," the shadow man scoffed. He waved a hand and the soldiers disappeared into thin air.

El turned to us and looked at Lucas. "Run back to where you first landed. I'll hold him off."

Mike put a hand on El's shoulder. "I'm not leaving you behind."

A tear dropped down El's cheek. "It's the only way the vision will end." She kissed Mike on the lips. "Go."

"El," Mike whimpered.

"Go!" El yelled.

We all sprinted off back to the mansion as it existed in Lucas's vision.

I looked back as I ran. The shadow man had turned into a shadowy mass, and El was screaming as it poured into her. It was possessing her the way it had Will. I looked back ahead, tears rolling down my face. I glanced over at Mike. He looked ready to bawl his eyes out. It was a look I hadn't seen on his face since they discovered Will's "body" in the quarry. The screams stopped as the woods went quiet.

"We're almost there!" Lucas shouted.

We kept running for what seemed like forever until finally the mansion came into view. We darted up the steps and through the front door. Passing out from exhaustion, I collapsed.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter Nine: El the Mage

My eyes opened and met Hopper's. He reached his hand out. I grabbed it, and he pulled me up. Everyone was slowly waking around me. Lucas sat up, rubbing his eyes. Thank god he made it out of his vision. I looked over at El. She was motionless except for some rapid eye movement behind shut eyes.

"I was starting to get worried," Hopper said. "You've all been out cold for two hours."

"El," I mumbled.

"What about El?" Hopper asked.

"The shadow man. He got her."

"The shadow man got her?" Hopper repeated with an incredulous tone. He stared at his adopted daughter still unconscious on the floor. "Can someone explain to me how the one girl in your group with powers gets taken while you all get away?!" He let out a yell. "I told you all to stay away from this place! This is what happens when you kids don't listen!" He kicked a nearby small table over. The lamp on it fell to the floor and shattered.

"We didn't want to leave her. She said there was no other way," Mike cried remorsefully. "You know leaving her is the last thing I'd ever want to do."

"There's always another way," Hopper snapped. He took a breath. "I need some air." He pulled out a cigarette and lighter and stormed out of the mansion, slamming the door behind him. Nancy, Jonathan and Steve ran in after seeing Hopper storm off.

"Is everything alright?" Nancy asked.

"Does it look like everything's alright? Eleven's still unconscious," Steve snarked at his ex, pointing at El.

"No need for snark, Steve," Nancy replied.

"The shadow man is in El like the Mind Flayer was in Will," Mike said.

"What are we going to do about her?" Lucas asked. The group stood around El.

"We'll burn him out of her," Nancy said. "Just like last time."

"But he just came here after he left me. Burning him doesn't kill him, it just makes him go somewhere else," Will said.

The room was quiet. No one had another suggestion. I glanced around the room, but froze when my eyes met El's. She was sitting up where she had been previously unconscious. Her eyes possessed a sinister quality that was unfamiliar.

"Guys..." I said still staring at El. "She's awake."

Everyone turned to look at her. She stood up, not acknowledging us.

"Shit, shit! What are we going to do now?" Dustin grumbled.

Mike took a step toward El. "El. Are you ok?" No response. "I know you can fight him, El. Don't let him take over." She ignored him and started walking toward the door. Mike moved closer to her. "El! Please! Say something!" El lifted her hand up and pushed Mike to the side with her mind, knocking him on the ground. While he wasn't seriously injured, probably just a bit bruised, Mike was frozen with guilt and fear as he stared up at his girlfriend walking past him toward the front door. He had never seemed as helpless as he looked in this moment.

"She's gone crazy!" Lucas exclaimed.

"We have to stop her from leaving, or she'll reopen the gate," Jonathan said. We all moved to block the door, but she waved her right hand and pushed us all aside. Nancy, Jonathan, Lucas and Max got knocked into each other to the left side of the door while Steve, Dustin, Will and I got knocked into each other on the right side of the door. With no one else in her way, she opened the door with her

powers and marched right out.

A couple of seconds later, we heard the thud of a body hitting the ground. We looked out the door. El was on the ground unconscious again, with Chief Hopper standing over her holding a syringe. I had always known Chief Hopper to be unapologetic, but in this moment, he had a very conflicted look on his face. He had just tranquilized his own daughter, which he must have justified as doing what had to be done, but his sad eyes betrayed that reasoning nonetheless. He leaned down, picked his daughter up and carried her inside, placing her back down on the carpeted floor. The main entry had no seating furniture, as it was more of a transitional space to get to every other part of the mansion than one anyone would normally spend as much time as we had. We crowded around El in a little huddle to plan our next move.

"Now what?" Nancy asked. "She's going to wake up eventually."

"I still think we should burn it out of her," Dustin said. "At least then it can't use her."

The voices of my friends and the chief began to drown out. I turned around. Will was wandering off up the left staircase. He appeared to be in some sort of trance. I began to follow him, leaving the rest of the group behind.

"Will?" I called out. No response. He kept moving through the upstairs hallway. Just like the first time I had entered the mansion, I could feel a door calling out to me. Will was headed the same way. After walking for what felt like twenty minutes, I found the door. Will went through it. I approached the door soon after and stepped through.

The hallway I stepped into looked identical to the one I had just been in, but it was covered in root-like tendrils, was much darker and had spores floating around in the air — just like the tunnels underneath Hawkins.

"Hello? Guys?" Will's voice called out. I saw Will a little ways ahead, looking around. Whatever trance had come over him before was gone.

"Will!" I yelled. He turned around. I ran over to him and hugged him. He didn't return my hug. It was a little odd, but I thought nothing of it.

"I think we're in the Upside Down," he surmised.

I let go of him. "How did we get here?"

"Maybe we're too late. Maybe El opened another gate," Will said.

"That doesn't make sense. She was clearly knocked out by Hopper," I replied.

"Let's get out of this building. Maybe we can figure out where we are from outside," Will suggested.

I agreed. We headed down the steps into the main entry of the Upside Down version of the mansion and walked out the door.

The sky was dark with storm clouds. It appeared to be nighttime.

Will stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to face me. "Why are you always following me around?" His tone was cold and unfamiliar.

"What?" I wasn't sure where this was headed.

"You always go wherever I go, take my side when there's an argument in the party. You follow me around like a lost puppy," Will said.

"That's kind of a weird way to describe our relationship," I stammered.

"It's pathetic," he continued. "But I guess it makes sense. You're always trying to impress me. Your vision showed that. Well, I'm not impressed. Maybe you should stop following me around and try being an individual."

My blood began to boil. How dare he use my vision against me like that? "What the hell is wrong with you? I told you my vision in confidence and now you're using it against me?"

"You can't stand that Mike and I are so close without any feelings getting in the way. You resent him for it," he replied coolly.

His words stung, partially because there was some truth to them, but also because of the vindictiveness behind them. I clenched my fists. "Shut up, Will."

"You're so insecure, you need me to feel good about yourself. To make you feel like less of a freak," Will hissed.

"Shut up! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" I screamed. Suddenly, a surge of power was released from my body and launched at Will, flinging him back twenty feet. I felt a drop of blood drip down my left nostril. I wiped it away with my arm, realizing I somehow had gained powers like El's. My mind returned to the rage I felt toward Will.

Will got up and walked toward me with a look of hatred. I felt a blast of energy come from him. It started to push me back but I channeled my newfound power to resist it. We were caught in a deadlock. My power versus Will's.

"You thought it was just you? Not so special now, huh?" he mocked me. I growled back at him. Words felt pointless when I had these abilities. Pushing back against his power was starting to strain me. I felt more blood dripping down my nostril. The same thing was happening to Will. How long could we keep this up? I was determined not to be the one to give out.

"STOP!" A familiar female voice called out. An energy belonging to neither Will nor me separated us. We turned around. El walked toward us. She wiped the drop of blood that had dripped from her nostril.

The sight of El made me forget my anger. "El!" I cried. I ran up and hugged her, glad to see a friendly face. She hugged me back.

"You have to stop fighting each other. The shadow man is trying to corrupt everything in my mind."

We were inside El's vision and not in the Upside Down. I sighed a breath of relief, realizing that Will wasn't fully to blame for the things

he said.

Will just stared at us from a distance. The hatred I had seen on his face faded and was replaced by guilt and embarrassment.

"How do we have your powers?" I asked El.

El looked at me. "Because I allowed it. The shadow man hasn't completely taken over yet. I'm still resisting where I can, like bringing you both here." It was as though we were inside an actual Dungeons and Dragons campaign and El was the game master who established the rules, like granting us use of her powers.

"Why just us?"

"You and Will seem to be able to resist the influence of the shadow man more than anyone else in the party. You didn't even need me to escape your vision," she said.

She had a point. Will had resisted him in his own vision, and I had been able to wake up from mine without El's help.

"It seems like the shadow man's influence is getting stronger. It almost made you two kill each other. We don't have much time. He can see where I am just like he could when he was in Will."

Will had been listening to our conversation. He started sobbing. I ran over to him.

I put my arm around him. "Will, I'm so sorry I hurt you. I should have controlled my anger."

He looked into my watery eyes. "No, I'm sorry."

"It's ok. I'm not mad."

"You should be mad. I said some really horrible things to you," he sobbed.

"I know you didn't mean it," I assured him.

"It felt like I did when I said them. He paused. "Being in this

relationship with you, it's amazing, but it's also scary because I've never been so intimate with anyone. For a moment, I felt like I needed to push you away, like maybe things could go back to the way they were before any of this stuff started happening."

"Is that what you want now?"

"No, nothing can ever go back to the way it was. I know I'm a freak, and people are going to judge our relationship, but I don't care anymore. You were right, Robert. What you said the night of our sleepover: we are stronger together."

I beamed. "And look at us now! We have El's powers. Just imagine what three El's could do to the shadow man." A small smile crept across Will's face.

Lightning struck, followed by a clap of thunder. The storm clouds above became more violent. "Guys, he's coming," El warned.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter Ten: The Final Stand

Will and I stood up.

"Get ready for a fight," El said. Will and I nodded.

"There you are, Eleven," the sinister voice of the shadow man boomed. A torrent of shadow flew down from the sky and formed itself into the familiar form that had plagued everyone's minds. "I see you brought a couple of friends in here. No matter. Soon you will wake up, and then we can open the gate."

El stood in front of Will and me. "No."

"No?" The shadow man repeated.

"No," El said again. "This ends now."

Will stepped forward next to El. "We're not scared of you anymore."

I stepped forward to line up with my friends. "The three of us are going to kick your ass."

"Is that so?" The shadow man replied. "Last I recall, Eleven works for me now." Eleven slowly stepped toward the shadow man. She then turned to face us, her pupils were so dilated that they made her eyes completely black. "Kill them," he commanded.

El lifted her right hand up. Will and I found ourselves hovering in the air a few feet off the ground.

"El, don't do this. Fight back," I pleaded.

"Please, El," Will begged. He turned to me. "Robert, we need to use our powers."

"I don't know how to control them," I countered. "I don't want to hurt El like I hurt you."

"Don't focus on El, focus on him," Will advised. "Just think about all the crap he's put us through, what he did to Lucas, what he did to El, what he did to us. Think about how angry that makes you."

My mind started flashing to the shadow man at the baseball game, Lucas laying unconscious on the parlor floor, Will's recount of his run-in with the shadow man in his vision, El telling us to run while she held the shadow man off and me looking back from a distance to see his shadowy essence enter her same the way Will had described his prior possession. All this pain had come from one source. I moved my hands forward with my palms out and released my anger toward the shadow man. Will did the same. Blood dripped from both my nostrils but I didn't care. I felt myself gain control of my altitude, still hovering slightly. We screamed as our combined power struck the shadow man, who was caught off guard. He clearly wasn't defeated but definitely deterred.

El's eyes returned to normal. The shadow man's influence over her appeared to be weakened.

"You're back!" I exclaimed as my feet touched the ground once more.

"Yes," El said.

"Thanks for not killing us," Will quipped.

"It's not over yet," she reminded us, her attention on the shadow man recomposing himself. The shadowy aura surrounding the shadow man became larger and larger, consuming him. Suddenly, a large leg with a three-pronged end planted itself on the ground to the left of the shadowy mass followed by another on the opposite side. Four more followed, and finally the featureless head of the entity revealed itself. The mind flayer stood before us, just as it appeared in Will's drawing. It was enormous, towering over the trees. Just being in its presence I could feel its malice and desire for consumption and destruction.

Will stood frozen, a look of terror struck across his face. "They really were the same," Will realized, trembling.

"You're not alone this time," I assured him.

The stormy sky was crimson as the mind flayer advanced toward us like a cloud in fast motion. The three of us squared off to face it head on. One of the shadowy creature's legs spiraled into a tornado like funnel. I channeled that same anger from before as we unleashed our power at the creature. The shadowy funnel made contact with the force from our telekinetic power. Even with the combined power of El, Will and me, it was a struggle to even deflect this one leg of the mind flayer away.

"It's too strong!" I yelled.

"We can't give up!" El shouted back.

"It's like it's feeding on our anger," Will remarked.

Will's observation made a light bulb go on in my head. "Wait, that's it!" I exclaimed. "It wants our anger and hatred. We need to stop thinking about the pain it's caused us and think about the people we care about and want to protect!" I extended my right hand to Will.

The night sky was filled with red, white and blue as the boom and crackle of fireworks rattled my eardrums. Every Fourth of July, Hawkins had its annual fireworks show on the field outside Hawkins Middle School. It was a large open space, perfect for families to sit with their chairs and blankets on the grass and stare up at the sky. No trees or buildings blocking sight lines.

The eyes of everyone in the party were glued to the fireworks display above us. This was Max's first Fourth in Hawkins and there was no way in hell she was going to spend it with her dysfunctional family. It was also El's first official Fourth, although she told us she heard the fireworks last year from Hopper's cabin when he was hiding her, and they frightened her until Hopper told her they were nothing to worry about. Now she was watching them for the first time and loving every second of them, Mike pleased that he was able to help give her the best first Fourth of July anyone could ask for.

I nudged Will gently. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

He nodded. Not taking his eyes off the sky, he spoke softly. "This field. The colored sky. The boom every time a firework goes off. I can't help but

think about when the mind flayer first got in my head." No one else was paying attention to us. It was as though we were in our own little bubble, just the two of us.

"If it's too much, I can bike home with you," I suggested. I was well aware of his sensitivities to places and sensations that triggered his bad Upside Down memories.

Will shook his head. "No. I'm alright. I like to think the fireworks would scare the mind flayer off." He stopped for a second, probably to think. "Sometimes, I feel like it's still watching me. Like it's not really here, but it's in the Upside Down, watching me, watching us. Waiting."

"As long as the gate's closed, I don't think we have anything to worry about. Besides, if somehow it finds a way through, I won't let anything happen to you." I grabbed his hand instinctually. It felt like the right thing to do, like it just made sense. In this short moment holding Will's hand, it felt like everything was as it should be. He was safe, and we were more connected than ever before. My heart was beating like the fireworks exploding one after another above us. He stared at me for a second, his shocked expression making me realize what I had done, I felt a pit in my stomach and my face flushed. I let go of his hand and moved it back to my side, embarrassed. The light from the fireworks illuminated his face enough that I could tell he was blushing, probably from how awkward this gesture had been. Boys, even when they're best friends, weren't supposed to hold hands. That was couples stuff, and even though I so desperately wanted us to be more than friends, I couldn't let him know that. He didn't tell me to let go or move his hand away though. Was he just embarrassed for me? Or did he actually enjoy it? No, that would mean he likes me as more than a friend, and that's ridiculous. It was probably one of those things both of us would silently acknowledge to never speak about. I wonder if the others noticed? Hopefully not.

Will grabbed my hand. Will and El also joined hands. I thought about all the people in Hawkins I cared about: my mom, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Nancy, Jonathan, Steve, Joyce, Hopper, El, and finally Will. I thought about the adventures and experiences I've shared with all of them: meeting Will, Mike and Lucas in first grade; the Dungeons and Dragons games; biking around Hawkins; searching for Will, finding El; the group hug I shared with Mike, Dustin and El after El fought off Troy and James; the hug I gave Will in his hospital

bed when I saw him for the first time after he was brought back from the Upside Down; our Ghostbusters themed Halloween where I had dressed up as a ghost for the Ghostbusters to catch; Max rising triumphant over her abusive brother Billy, crawling through the tunnels with Steve and the party; hanging my photos in Castle Byers that Will had picked out; camping out for and watching *Back to the Future* with the party; sitting on the field watching the Fourth of July fireworks just a few days earlier with Will and the rest of the party; the love and support Will and I received after coming out to the party; reuniting with Lucas in his vision.

I could feel my power grow stronger the more I thought about my friends and family. The insurmountable force of the mind flayer waned as we obliterated the leg in front of us. Its shriek bellowed through the dark forest.

"It's working!" El said. "Keep it up!" Will and I nodded.

I focused on Will, the boy I loved more than anyone else in the world. My mind went to our most recent sleepover, where I finally revealed my feelings for him, and Will reciprocated those feelings. I thought about the kiss we shared right after and our late-night conversations and second kiss as well as dancing with him to the record he stole from Jonathan. All of my other memories with Will that I cherished flooded into my mind. I felt my power continue to grow as I levitated again, this time under my own control.

The mind flayer sent another leg to attack us, but it was no match for us. We decimated it as it reached our combined energy.

We glanced at each other and silently acknowledged our increased power levels. It felt like the three of us were connected as one, fully in sync. The aura around us grew larger. Every inch of my body was white hot as blood gushed from my nostrils. We were screaming at the top of our lungs when finally, we unleashed a huge blast of energy at the mind flayer, giving it everything we had. As it made contact, it produced a blinding white light that illuminated the whole area. The mind flayer shrieked in pain as the energy began to disintegrate its body. We continued to channel more power, unrelenting in our attack. The mind flayer became fully engulfed in the light and let out one final screech before it was completely

vaporized.

We landed back on the ground. The woods were quiet and the sky returned to a normal midnight blue. The spores in the air were gone as were all other signs of the Upside Down. We held on to each other as we trudged toward the front door of the mansion, all of us ready to collapse from exhaustion. I opened the door manually, and we all fell through the doorway, giving in to our fatigue. Everything went black.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven: Home Again

My eyes opened onto a familiar looking yellow painted ceiling above me. I was in Will's bedroom and in his bed. Daylight poured into the room through the window on the right.

"Hey, sleepyhead," I heard Will say. My eyes darted to the source of his voice. He was sitting at the edge of the bed on the left side toward the door.

"Hey," was all I could muster while still waking up. He leaned over and kissed my cheek, making me blush.

"I woke up about two hours ago," Will said. "It was really tempting to wake you up, but my mom said to let you sleep, so I've just been sitting here waiting." Before I could ask him what was going on, Will got up and opened the door, sticking his head out. "Guys! He's awake! Come say hi!" he called out.

A few seconds later, the whole party filed into his bedroom and crowded around the bed: Mike, El, Dustin, Max, Lucas, and of course Will. Everyone went up to hug me one by one. I was all smiles.

"El told us all about how Will and you had her powers and how all of you defeated the Mind Flayer," Dustin said. "That's got to be like the coolest thing ever. If only I could've seen it..."

"It was only part of the Mind Flayer," Will corrected.

"Don't ruin the story," Lucas frowned at Will.

"She said it was your idea that really helped defeat it," Mike said. "I think that's really cool." My cheeks turned red from his compliment. "What was it like... having powers?"

I sat up. "Well, at first, it was kind of scary because I couldn't control them, but then it was pretty awesome. It's like having an extension of your emotions that you can manipulate things with. I didn't really have them that long though." I paused. "What happened, afterward?"

I asked. "All I can remember is going through the front door and collapsing."

"We made it out of my vision, but you and Will passed out. Then everyone left the mansion and took you both here to rest," El explained. "Papa said no more hospitals for a while."

"So is it really gone? All of the Upside Down stuff? Closed off or wiped out just like that?" Max asked.

"Hopefully," Mike said. "It's hard to know for sure."

"Good riddance," Lucas said. "I swear if I see another Dart running around..."

"Hey, Dart was cool and my friend," Dustin protested.

"Oh no, not this again," Max groaned.

We laughed.

"Thanks, Robert and Will, for saving me," El said.

"It's the least we could do for you saving us," I responded.

"Multiple times," Will added.

"That's what friends do," El said, her lips forming a small smile.

"Lucas, Robert and I have something to tell you," Will said. I knew immediately what he wanted to say, remembering that Lucas hadn't been there when we told everyone about our newfound relationship.

Lucas looked at the two of us curiously. "What is it?"

I turned to Will. "Do you want to say it or should I?"

"You can say it," he answered, motioning me on.

I turned back to Lucas and took a deep breath. "We're together now."

Lucas stared at us for a moment. "Wait what?" He looked around at the rest of the party. "You guys hearing this?" Everyone gazed back at

him knowingly. "You all knew already, didn't you?" Mike, El, Dustin, and Max nodded. "Wow, well I missed a lot apparently."

We all laughed.

I jumped onto my bed. *Home sweet home*, I thought. It felt like it had been ages since I'd been in my own bed, let alone my house. My mom was glad to see me home again, but of course she had no idea what I had been up to the last few days. I never told her about the Upside Down. She wasn't allowed to be in the know. She only knew about Hawkins Lab closing down like everyone else. That was public news. Why it really closed down was left out of the papers, of course.

I looked around at my walls. I had a *Star Wars* poster on the wall right across from my bed next to my dresser. To my right, I had a collage of pictures of me with various other party members. To my left was my desk, which I hadn't really used the last few weeks because I didn't have any homework during summer vacation.

It was nighttime now. Just a few hours earlier I developed the photos on my camera's film roll. The ones from the baseball game were nonexistent, which didn't surprise me. The group photo Max took of us in front of the mansion did turn out really well. I decided to save it for Castle Byers. I had spent most of the day with the party, hanging out like we had been before the whole mansion and shadow man business started. Steve hosted a pool party at his house today to celebrate the hopeful end of our Upside Down troubles. Unfortunately it wasn't all sunshine and games at the party.

"What are you waiting for, Robert? The water's nice and warm!" Dustin shouted at me.

My feet were pressed together at the edge of the pool. Nancy and Jonathan were behind me sitting on adjacent chaises lost in conversation, while Steve and the rest of the party were already in the pool, looking up at me. Bending my legs, I leaped forward, splashing into the water. I emerged from under the water and swam over to the everyone else.

"Who's up for a game of chicken?" Max asked the group.

"Me!" El exclaimed emphatically, raising her arms up quickly and

splashing Mike accidentally in the process. Mike squirmed from the impact of the splash.

"Girls versus guys?" Lucas suggested.

"You're on, stalker," Max smirked at her boyfriend.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it right. Tournament style. Two games at once and the winners face each other," Mike proposed.

"Will, wanna be my partner?" I asked him. Will looked unbelievably attractive standing in the pool sans shirt, his usually neat straight hair tousled in wet strands pushed away from his forehead toward the side, water beads dripping gracefully down his shoulders and pale chest.

"You know it!" he beamed.

I watched as Max climbed on top of El's shoulders while Lucas climbed on top of Mike's shoulders. The pairs were squared off.

"Dustin, looks like it's you and me, buddy," Steve said. Dustin nodded.

I turned back to Will. "Looks like we're facing Dustin and Steve."

"We got this," Will said. I lowered my body so Will could straddle his legs around my shoulders. I grabbed his legs dangling in front of me and hoisted myself up with him on top of me. He was heavier than I thought. Will had grown a bit taller in the last few months and wasn't quite as diminutive as he used to be.

"Everyone ready?" Mike asked the group.

Everyone responded in the affirmative.

"Nancy! Can you call it so none of us has an unfair head start?" Mike shouted at his sister, who hadn't been paying attention to us and was surprised to hear her brother calling her name.

Nancy turned away from Jonathan, her eyes meeting Mike's. "What do you want?"

"Just call out 'chicken fight' on a count of three," Mike said.

Nancy stood up and scanned the pool of chicken fighters. Her face lit up, revealing a sudden investment in our game. She turned to Jonathan, snickering. "Oh this should be fun to watch." Turning back to us, she raised her voice. "One, two, three, chicken fight!"

Max and Lucas grappled each other, desperate to knock the other off.

At the same time, Dustin and Will began to engage each other. Their hands met as they tried to push each other backward. I pursed my lips as I held onto Will's legs, determined to not let him fall.

"El, move forward," Max commanded. El moved Max closer to Lucas and Mike. While her right hand grappled with Lucas's left hand, she moved her left hand behind Lucas's ear and tickled him.

Lucas started laughing uncontrollably. "Max! Stop! That's not fair!" Apparently right behind his ears was a particularly ticklish spot for him. He lost his composure as he let go of Max to block his ear. She grabbed his arm moving toward his ear and yanked it, pulling him down into the water.

"Lucas and Mike are out!" Nancy announced.

Lucas glared at his girlfriend. "You cheated!"

"Did I?" Max retorted.

Dustin and Will were still going at it.

"You're not making this easy, are you Will?" Dustin teased.

Will stuck his tongue out at Dustin, eager to beat his curly haired friend.

I was caught in a forward and backward dance with Steve. As Dustin and Will pushed up against each other, we moved with the momentum of whoever had the advantage. Taking a more aggressive approach, Dustin started pushing us farther and farther back. Will couldn't hold back their advance. Suddenly Dustin stopped and let go of Will, but the momentum from walking backward and sudden loss of extra support from Dustin grappling Will caused me to lose my balance. Will fell backward off of me and into the water. It was a strategic, but risky move by Dustin, that ended up paying off.

"Robert and Will are out!" Nancy called out after I popped my head back up at the surface. Will poked his head up above the surface a little later. He glanced at me quickly before turning away.

"I'm gonna go dry off," he said, sounding distant. Before I could say anything, Will quickly swam away and up to the edge of the pool before climbing out. He wrapped a towel around himself and sat down on one of the chairs at the table near the sliding glass patio door.

Why was he being so weird all of a sudden? Maybe he took the loss worse than I thought he would. No, it couldn't be that. Will was always a good sport. I wondered if something else might be troubling him. Was he hurt?

I swam up to the edge of the pool closest to where Will was sitting. "Will, are you ok? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," he replied not looking at me. So he was definitely not making eye contact with me now. Something was definitely wrong. I didn't want to make a scene, so I decided I'd try to talk to him after we all got out. Right now the final chicken fight between team Mike and Steve and team Max and El was about to commence.

"3, 2, 1, chicken fight!" Nancy shouted.

Max and Dustin grappled each other. Dustin had a very clear height advantage from being on top of Steve, but that didn't seem to bother Max. They circled each other, both trying to exhaust the other one's carrier under them. El was doing a very impressive job of keeping Max up. Eventually Steve got exhausted from carrying Dustin so long and it caused them to slip up as the back and forth and circling movements became more and more frequent. El backed Max up quickly as Dustin lunged forward to try to push Max off. Dustin missed his mark and fell face first into the water. The girls were triumphant.

"Max and El are the winners!" Nancy declared.

"Wooh! Girls win!" El shouted. Max was beaming with pride.

"I went easy on you," Dustin explained, trying to sound macho.

"Oh really? Well, I'd hate to see what try-hard Dustin looks like," Max mocked him.

Later when we had all gotten out of the pool and were drying off in the sun, I was so engrossed in a conversation about soap operas with Max and El that I hadn't noticed Mike was not with the group. When I realized he wasn't chatting with the other guys, I spotted him sitting with Will at the table in the corner by the patio door. Damn it! I forgot my own boyfriend was sitting off in the corner by himself all this time. Curse my increasing interest in soap operas. I tuned out of the conversation and stared at Will and Mike, eager to determine what they could be talking about. Unfortunately they were out of earshot. It seemed to be something serious as no smiles or laughs were shared between them. They must have realized I was staring at them because they glanced over at me for a second, both pairs of eyes meeting mine before turning back and resuming their conversation. No wave or other acknowledgement. Well, that was awkward, I thought.

"Earth to Robert!" Max snapped, waving a hand in front of my face.

"Sorry, I'm just worried about Will."

"Go talk to him! He's your boyfriend," El encouraged.

I walked over to the table Will and Mike were sitting at. Before I could open my mouth, Will stood up. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mike. Bye." He grabbed his stuff and hurried off.

"Will, wait!" I called out. He ignored me. He disappeared into Steve's house. I heard the front door open and close soon after. He was gone.

I never got a straight answer from Mike about what they talked about. Why couldn't Will talk to me but could talk to Mike? He must have been talking about me. That's what that glance was. Maybe he really did mean what he said to me in El's vision. The more I thought about the more I realized we did kind of rush into this whole relationship thing and never really discussed it. It just happened by circumstance. Neither of us had really been ready to confess our love to the other. Did I blow it by telling him too soon? Will was dealing with enough, and I went and dumped my secret crush on him into the mix, putting more pressure on him. Maybe he really does want things to go back to the way they were before we were together. Could I really blame him for wanting to feel normal after everything he's been through? Our relationship is anything but, or maybe "was"

is the better word. I don't even know anymore.

I tried radioing him throughout the evening, but he never picked up. I also tried calling his house, but his mom told me Will was drawing and didn't want to be disturbed. I had a feeling that was bullshit, but I didn't want to be rude and call her out on that.

Is this it? Is this the end for us? Is Will just going to ignore me now? He seemed perfectly fine before the chicken fight, but as soon as we lost, a switch flipped. I wanted so badly to know what was going on with him, so I could help him through it. But it seems like I'm the problem. He doesn't want to speak to me or even look at me. I felt a pit in my stomach as I closed my eyes and curled up on my bed, trying desperately to think about something, anything, more positive.

Tap, tap, tap. I jolted up and almost fell out of my bed. The sound came from my window. Was it a bird? No, the sound was too blunt to be a beak. I got off my bed and opened the curtains. It was Will! Somehow he had climbed up to my second story window. Mike had told me about how he saw Steve once climb into Nancy's bedroom in a similar way.

I opened my window. "Will, what are you doing here?" I whispered. It was really late and my mom was sleeping so I didn't want to wake her up.

"That's one way to say, 'hi,'" Will replied, squatting on the roof outside my window.

"How did you even get up here?"

"I climbed up. It's not that difficult," he chuckled. Well, that's a comforting thought: my bedroom window easily accessible by burglars.

"Alright Spiderman, come in, but keep it down, my mom's sleeping," I said. I backed up to let him crawl through my window. Once he was inside, he closed the window behind him.

"I couldn't sleep. I kept feeling like I needed to talk to you, make sure that we're ok, you know?" Will said.

"Yeah, we didn't really have any chance today," I agreed.

"So, are we ok?" he asked.

"You tell me."

Will tilted his head a bit. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, I'm just confused. After that chicken fight, you just ran off."

Will bit his lip. "I'm sorry. I've just been feeling a bit guilty... actually a lot guilty. The things I said to you in El's vision... they were so awful. When I fell in the water during the chicken fight, it reminded me of how you flung me back with El's powers in a fit of well-deserved rage for saying those things. Every time I've looked at you since, I just hear myself saying them all over again. And no matter how much I want to blame the shadow man, I still said them. They were my thoughts."

Poor Will. He blamed himself for me force pushing him in El's vision. I really am a terrible boyfriend for allowing him to think that way. After we defeated the shadow monster, we just pretended like nothing happened and we were supposed to be ok. Why did I expect that he would just be ok after what we went through in there? "Hey. Don't blame yourself. I shouldn't have flung you back with El's powers. No matter what you said, it wasn't right of me. I'm sorry."

Will was trembling. "Why do you put up with me? How could you possibly still love me when I've said such terrible things to you... when I took advantage of your trust? I don't deserve your love. I never have."

I absolutely hated seeing Will like this. So broken and self-loathing. I pulled him closer to me and wrapped my arms around him.

"Will, you deserve the world. Those things you said to me in El's vision don't define you, nor do your brushes with the Upside Down. It's your persistence, your bravery, the way you're so accepting and caring for your friends and others, your sense of humor and love of music, art and adventure, and how you've always been there for me. That's what defines you. All that and more is why I love you so much.

Also you're pretty freaking cute, Will Byers."

Tears fell down Will's cheeks and dripped onto my shoulder as I held him in my arms.

"I was thinking earlier, just before you knocked on my window, about us," I continued. "About how I kind of just dumped my feelings for you on you without thinking about what you were going through. We kind of rushed into this relationship without really talking about it. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry I put this pressure on you, and if you want me to give you some space I'll gladly do so."

"I pressured you into confessing your feelings. I even made you cry. What kind of friend does that?"

"That's all on me, Will. A part of me wanted so badly to let go of that secret I had been holding onto forever, and you gave me an opportunity to do it. I have plenty of regrets, but telling you how I feel about you that night is not one of them. You came over tonight because you wanted to know if we're ok. Well, I think we're more than ok, but if you disagree, please let me know."

"If anything, you're the one who took the pressure off of me. You confessed first. Us being together finally — it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't ever want to lose that." He wrapped his arms around me.

Great, now I was crying. "Me neither." I sniffled. I hugged him back squeezing him tight. In our embrace, we were like two opposite velcro strips clinging to each other.

After a few moments, we separated, although I think both of us would have been fine holding each other like we were forever. I stared into Will's big hazel eyes, which were especially reflective from being watery. "How did I get so lucky to have you in my life?"

"You forgot your lunch that day in first grade. And I shared mine with you," he reminded me, of course knowing I remembered how we met, since I used that memory when I told him my true feelings for him.

"Best lunch I never had," I joked. He laughed. Will had the most infectious laugh. It was just right. Not too obnoxious, and not too understated. Ever since the Upside Down started plaguing our lives and especially Will's, I hadn't heard that laugh as often as I used to. Within the larger party, when Dustin or someone else made a joke, he would chuckle, but not laugh the way he was now. It's not even like my joke was that funny, but I think he just reserved his real laugh for times like these, more intimate moments between close friends, or in our case, boyfriends.

"You have no idea how much I really want to kiss you right now. I spent the whole morning and afternoon with you and didn't even get to kiss you once."

Will laughed again. It was like he was relinquishing all the inner pain he arrived at my window with through his laughter. We leaned in and pressed our lips together.

I pulled away for a second for some pillow talk. "You know I could really get used to you sneaking into my room like this," I smirked. "How about we do this again same time tomorrow?"

"It's a date," Will replied with his own smirk. "Maybe a little earlier though." I nodded and laughed before our lips met again. Once we were satisfied, we sat crisscrossed on my bed.

"Do you really hate Mike?" Will asked me out of the blue.

Just the fact that he had reason to ask me that made me feel ashamed. "No. Of course I don't hate him." I had hoped that the hug Mike and I shared after Will and I told the party about our relationship would be a step toward rekindling our friendship beyond the larger party, but Will seemed to have his doubts. "I guess you've already picked up on this, but I would sometimes get jealous of you and him together because unlike our friendship, he never had to worry about hiding feelings for you. He could tell you everything."

"We can tell each other everything now. You know I couldn't tell him everything so it was pretty one-sided anyway. Like I could trust him about Upside Down stuff but when it came to liking boys, I kept that to myself."

"There are other boys?" I teased.

Will's face turned red. "You know what I mean!"

"I'm sorry for being jealous. I guess it doesn't really make any sense."

"You're right, it doesn't. I need you to be ok with Mike and I being close. And honestly you should talk to him more. He misses you."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah. At the pool earlier. He tells me everything, remember?"

I sighed. "I miss him too. And yes, I'm definitely ok with you and Mike being close."

He crawled on his hands and knees toward me. "Besides, we're closer," he breathed in my ear, before kissing my cheek. My face flushed from his seductiveness. Seductive Will. Now that's a Will I could get used to. He moved back into his criss-cross position.

"You ready for high school?" Will asked in earnest.

"Yeah, I hear it's much better than middle school," I answered.

"From whom?" Will asked.

"Steve, mostly."

"Well he was basically the king of Hawkins High for a while, so of course he'd make it sound amazing," Will reasoned.

"Are you worried about it?"

"I don't know. Jonathan didn't really have many friends in high school so I guess he's not the best person to look to, but I know a lot of the kids picked on him. I don't want that to happen to us too," Will responded. "Troy and James were bad enough, but high school has people like Billy."

"Billy's crazy. I don't think most people will be like him. Besides, if we can take on the shadow monster, those bullies won't stand a

chance," I said.

"You're always so sure of things," Will observed. "And I always hope you're right, but remember we don't actually have powers in the real world."

"That doesn't matter. The bullies don't have them either," I replied. "How's Jonathan doing? Senior year coming up and all," I asked, changing the subject.

"He's alright, I guess. He and Nancy have been spending a lot of time together this summer, so I don't get to see him as much," Will answered. "On top of that he's also been taking more hours at the general store."

"That's got to be rough."

"It's not too bad. I'm happy he has someone else to hang out with. I used to be his only friend, as you know," Will said. "I'm just worried about next year when he goes off to college. My mom is going to be an emotional wreck. She always relies on him to help out with things like grocery shopping, dropping me off and picking me up, and cooking. It was hard for her when my dad left, but at least Jonathan was there. Once Jonathan's gone, I'll have to step up and help out," Will said.

"I'll help too," I offered.

"In between helping your own single mother out?" Will asked. "Come to think of it, what's with our group and broken families? Only Mike and Lucas have normal families and Mike's parents are clearly not happily married."

"I honestly don't know," I laughed. "But it makes me think marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Will nodded before looking over at my digital alarm clock sitting on my nightstand. "Oh man, it's midnight."

I looked over at the alarm clock. 12:00am, the lit up numerals read. "I didn't realize it had gotten so late," I said.

"I gotta get home," Will said starting to get up.

I grabbed his arm. "No, you shouldn't bike home this late at night. It's not safe. You can stay over," I recommended.

"But my mom will go crazy if she wakes up and I'm not there. And it's too late to call her to let her know I'm here," he worried.

"We'll get up real early and call her first thing, ok?"

"Alright. Thanks for letting me stay the night," Will said.

"No problem. I'm really glad you came over."

"Me too. I feel a lot better," Will said. "Hey, do you mind if I take my jeans off to sleep? It's kind of hot in here."

"No, not at all," I said. "You know, I think I'll take my pajama pants off too. It is pretty hot." I thought it might make Will more comfortable if I undressed too. I pulled down my pajama pants and kicked them off my feet. I watched Will do the same to his jeans. His skinny legs were so cute. He was wearing a pair of white boxer shorts. Will looked over to catch me admiring him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Will questioned me.

"You're just so adorable, I can't help it," I admitted.

Will's cheeks went crimson. "Quit it. It's embarrassing."

"I'm sorry."

There was a moment of silence. "You're really cute too," Will blurted out.

"Oh, um, thanks," I replied with hesitation. Even for us, this was getting awkward. "Do you wanna..."

"Yes," Will interrupted.

We started making out on my bed, both of us wearing boxer shorts and t-shirts.

"Is it me or did it get way hotter in here?" Will asked.

"It's just you," I joked. Will laughed. "Yeah, let's take off our shirts," I said. Will nodded. We pulled our shirts off and threw them on the floor. I gazed at Will's undefined chest lit by the soft yellow glow of my table lamp. His small nipples were adorable. We continued to make out, our tongues dancing between each others' mouths. We rolled around in the bed, finding it impossible to settle in one position.

"Can I kiss your neck?" I asked Will, wanting to try something new in this sensual moment we were sharing.

"Yes," he said. I began sucking at his neck, right around the two moles he had on the right side of his neck (my left side when facing him). Will moaned softly. I ran my hands across his chest, my fingers particularly lingering around his nipples.

"I love those moles on your neck. They make you one of a kind," I said.

"God, you're so embarrassing, Robert," Will groaned. "But if we're being embarrassing, you know I love that mole next to your nose."

"Oh, I was actually thinking about getting that removed when I'm older," I quipped.

"No don't!" Will whined. "I'll never forgive you."

I laughed. "I'm just kidding, Will." He groaned.

"My turn to kiss your neck," he demanded.

"Ok, I giggled. He lifted his legs to move over so he could position himself on top of me. He started sucking at my neck. I had never felt anything like this before. It felt incredible. I moaned in pleasure, trying not to be too loud because my mom was still sleeping. I knew I'd have marks on my neck in the morning, but I didn't care.

"We really should get to sleep," Will suggested after he had his fill of my neck. "Or we're not going to be able to get up early enough to call my mom."

"You sure you don't want to make out a little more?"

He rolled his eyes at me.

"Alright," I acquiesced. I pulled the covers on my bed back. We both tucked our feet under the sheets before I pulled them back over our half naked bodies. I leaned over and shut off the lamp. The room was dark, except for the pale moonlight shining through my window. Will snuggled up to me, his smooth legs brushing up against mine. Despite the warm temperature in my room, the warmth of Will's body on mine didn't bother me one bit. In fact, it was soothing, the same way it was that night in Will's bedroom just a few days ago.

"I love you, Robert," Will murmured.

"I love you too, Will."

That was the last thing I remember before I fell asleep.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve: The Reconciliation

Beep, beep, beep, beep! My alarm was going off. I slammed the off button on my digital alarm clock resting on my nightstand. It was 7:00am.

Will had been holding me in his sleep. He was too cute. The alarm woke him up shortly after I moved to reach my alarm clock.

"Good morning, Robert," Will mumbled.

"Hey, Will. Let's go downstairs to use the phone. We have to call your mom."

As soon as he heard me say *mom*, he sprang up.

"Oh my god, she's gonna be so pissed! Let's go!" He grabbed my hand and started to pull me out of the room. We were still in just our boxers.

"Will, wait! We should put some clothes on! Unless you want my mom to find us running around half-naked." Will shook his head. He put his jeans and T shirt on from yesterday and I put on my pajama pants and T-shirt that I threw on the floor last night. Once we were dressed, he grabbed my hand again, this time successfully pulling me out of my room. We ran down the steps to the kitchen where the phone was resting on the wall. He dialed his house, his foot tapping the floor anxiously as he waited for his mom or Jonathan to pick up.

"Hello?" Joyce Byers's voice came through the phone's speaker.

"Mom, it's me. I just wanted to let you know I stayed over at Robert's last night."

"Oh thank god. I was starting to go crazy thinking maybe you disappeared again, but then I thought, maybe, just maybe, you snuck off to a friend's house. I had just called the Wheeler's, but Karen told me you weren't there."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you," Will apologized. "I wasn't even planning on staying over, but it got too late to bike home, and I know you don't like me biking at alone at night."

"I don't care if you have to call in the middle of the night or shake me awake before you leave. Let me know next time if you're sleeping over somewhere else. Make sure Robert gives you a good breakfast and then come straight home."

"Ok Mom, I will."

"Love you."

"Love you too." Will hung up the phone. He turned to me. "She's mad."

"Can't say I blame her," I replied.

Will nudged me. "Hey, you're supposed to be on my side," he whined. His expression softened. "I knew I'd get in trouble, but I had to see you last night. It was worth it."

I grinned at him. He was clearly feeling much better than he had been even yesterday morning when I woke in his bed after we defeated the shadow monster. Will had a lot of energy today. It was a shame he had to go home so early, probably to face some sort of punishment for making his mom worry about him.

Coincidentally, my mom walked down the stairs and made her way toward the source of chatter she had heard from upstairs. It was as if the universe decided that it was my turn to get in trouble with my mom.

"Good morning, you two," my mom said. She turned to me and gave me a look that I instantly recognized as saying, "What is he doing here so early and unannounced?"

"Morning, mom," I answered with a sheepish grin. Will greeted her as well, giving her a small wave. I hadn't expected company last night either, and she had been sleeping, so it's not like there had been any chance to tell her Will would be here in the morning.

"Well since we have company, I'll make your favorite chocolate chip pancakes, but you two will have to clean up so I can get to work on time," my mom decided.

Will and I thanked her. She whipped up a batter and poured some on the griddle. Soon enough, we were chowing down on short stacks of delicious chocolate chip pancakes. My mom took a swig of coffee from her mug before waving us goodbye and leaving briskly, shutting the door behind her. I heard the muffled sound of the engine of her car roaring to life right before she pulled out of the driveway and drove off. We were left with dirty plates, a mixing bowl and spoon, and griddle that needed to be cleaned.

"We better get to work," Will suggested as we stared at the dirty kitchenware in front of us.

I nodded. Will took our plates off the table and brought them over to the sink. I went over to the counter to grab the mixing bowl and spoon. We waited for the griddle to cool down before dealing with it. Will was at the sink rinsing off the dishes when I brought the bowl and spoon. We took turns using the faucet. I started to fill up the bowl with water to rinse the loose batter away.

"Hey, Robert."

"Yeah?" I replied turning to look at Will. I was met with a splash of water to my face from a cup he was rinsing off. My hair became soaking wet. "Will!" I shouted, wiping my face and eyes. He was laughing, harder than normal. I quickly grabbed the bowl out of the sink and splashed him with half a bowlful of water before he could dodge it.

Will was now drenched compared to me. His T-shirt clung to his thin body, while his jeans were darkened by their dampness. He stared at me in disbelief as I laughed at my successful payback. His expression transformed from shocked to devious as he rushed to the sink to grab another cup. Before we knew it, we were engaged in a dishwasher fight, eager to drench the other one more. The floor became slippery, and we clung to the counters to keep our balance as we splashed each other and ducked out of the way of incoming water. A couple of minutes of this passed before we stopped, realizing all in all, we had

just created more work for ourselves in our fun.

"Can we just agree it's a tie for whose more soaked?" I asked.

Will's eyes scanned the room. Puddles had formed on the floor, and the light of the morning sun reflected off of the pooling water on the counter tops. "We kind of got carried away, didn't we?"

I smiled. "That's ok. We'll clean it up. Besides, now we get to hang out a little longer before you have to go home."

Will nodded and flashed a small smile, his lips closed. I could tell he wasn't excited about the prospect of going home to an angry mom, and now he'd have wet clothes to explain on top of that.

"I'll get some towels from the pantry upstairs. Do you want some dry clothes? I was going to change anyway, but I don't want you to go home wet."

"Sure. That'd be great. Thanks."

I rubbed my wet feet on the carpet outside of the kitchen before running up the steps to the upstairs pantry. I grabbed a few large fluffy bath towels and brought them back down to the kitchen. We each unfolded a towel and mopped the floor first, using our feet to move the towels across the floor. I took a different towel and wiped off the counter tops. After the floors and counter tops were dry, we finished washing the dishes and kitchenware, including the griddle, which had cooled down. Will followed me upstairs and went to the bathroom to take off his wet clothes while I grabbed a random navy t-shirt and pair of khaki shorts for him to change into. The shirt was a little big on him, but not outrageously so.

"Wearing your clothes... it's kind of funny," Will commented, looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. I had just finished changing into a light green button down short-sleeve shirt and gray shorts and was standing next to him.

"It's kind of like when guys give girls their jackets, right?"

"It's more like the girl decided to raid his closet," Will joked.

"Think your mom will notice?"

"That I'm coming home with clothes she didn't buy for me or are hand-me-downs from Jonathan while carrying wet clothes? Definitely not," he answered sarcastically.

"Leave your wet clothes here. I'll stick them in the washing machine for you. I'll bring them back to your place or you can pick them up whenever."

"You don't have to do that."

"Really. It's not a problem. At least you won't have to explain wet clothes to your mom."

"Thank you." He gave me a peck on the lips.

I brushed my teeth and my hair, Will watching me silently. Activities like these I was used to performing in solitude, so it was a little weird being watched, but I didn't really mind. It's not like he was watching me shower or something. Of course now the thought of him staring at me standing in the running water while I wash my naked body came into my head. While it was incredibly awkward to picture while he was standing right there, I couldn't help but be somewhat aroused by the idea. I felt a little stir in my crotch as I imagined him joining me in the shower, us washing each other's bodies. Much less awkward, but much more intimate. I don't think either of us were ready for that kind of intimacy yet. I quickly shook off the thought as my elbow moved back and forth with each brush stroke on my teeth, not wanting to have to explain a boner to him. I grabbed a cup, filled it up and rinsed my mouth out, swishing around before I spat. I got the sense Will was enjoying watching my bathroom routine from his silence and patience. I put on some deodorant before I took one last look in the mirror and we made our way out of the bathroom. Will grabbed his socks and sneakers from my room. I stuffed Will's wet clothes in the washing machine downstairs. I had hung mine in the bathroom to dry along with the wet towels.

We left my house and biked back to his place. It was our first bike ride just the two of us as a couple. We didn't try to race each other like we normally did, instead taking it slow and trying to savor every

moment before we had to part ways for the rest of the day. Our bikes stayed close together side by side, except when a car would pass us, in which case I would fall back behind him until it had passed.

"We haven't had a first date," Will observed.

I realized he was right. There hadn't really been any opportunity for one in the last few days. "Did you have something in mind?" I asked hopefully.

He thought about it for a few seconds. "Let's go see *Back to the Future* again, just the two of us."

"I'd love to see it again with you! When do you want to go?"

"Maybe tomorrow? I'll see if my mom will let me leave the house. She might put me on house arrest after the mansion business and then sneaking out last night," he joked.

I laughed. "She's definitely not letting you out of her sight. I guess she'll have to chaperone."

"No! Don't even joke about that!" he groaned.

I couldn't stop laughing. It was fun to mess with him like this, seeing him get so flustered. It was adorable.

We finally reached his house. I parked my bike in the front while Will wheeled his bike around to the side of the house. I walked him to the front door and gave him a big hug, squeezing him tight because I knew I wouldn't get another chance at least until the next day.

"Let me know about tomorrow."

He wrapped his arms around me. "Definitely. Thanks for... everything. I feel so much better."

"Of course. I'm happy you're happy." We let go of each other. He took out his house key from his pocket and unlocked the door. He took a few steps inside before turning around to look at me one more time with a smile on his face. I gave him a big goofy grin and waved at him before he closed the door.

I sighed. For the first time in a long time, I felt like things were going to be ok for Will. He wasn't stressed out or guilt-ridden, and our relationship seemed to be healthy and stable. Additionally he was more exuberant today than he had been recently. It was just a shame he would be cooped up at home for the rest of the day. Hopefully he would be able to go out tomorrow, and we could finally have our first date.

What was I going to do with the rest of the day? Lucas had to help his parents out around the house. El was going on a ride-along with Hopper. Max was also basically on house arrest today because her dad noticed she had been gone too much recently. Dustin wasn't doing anything in particular. I don't think Mike was either. Mike! That's what I would do today: apologize to Mike for being distant and then hopefully hang out just the two of us, like old times.

I proceeded to hop on my bike and ride away from the Byers residence toward my new destination: the Wheeler residence. Unlike the ride over here, now I was biking fast. Maybe it was an irrational worry, but I didn't want Mike to get busy with something else before I could get there. I was pedaling as furiously as I could, panting as my heart rate shot up. I probably should have tried to radio him, but I wanted my coming over to be a surprise. Stupid, I know. What if he was out? Maybe he and Dustin decided to go out to do something and didn't invite me, thinking I'd be with Will. Maybe his mom took him to do errands? I believed the faster I pedaled the more likely it would be that he'd still be home.

As I finally approached his house, I was about ready to collapse. I lazily reached for the doorbell and pressed it before letting my hand slip down to my side.

A couple of moments later, the door opened. It was Mrs. Wheeler.

"Robert! What a surprise?" She studied me for a second or so. "Oh my! You look like you're about to pass out! Come in. Let me give you some water." I stepped inside, still panting. I collapsed on the couch as she rushed into the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

I heard someone make their way down the steps. "Robert?" Mike peeked his head into the living room from around the corner where

the steps were.

"Hey Mike," I greeted my friend between breaths with a little wave.

Mrs. Wheeler rushed past him with a glass of water. "Here you go. Let me know if you need more," she said.

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler."

Mike made his way toward me and sat down next to me on the couch as I chugged the glass.

"What are you doing here?" he asked me. I sensed a bit of hurt in his voice.

I finished the water and put the glass down on the coffee table, exhaling a little over-dramatically. "I'm not allowed to visit my friend's house?"

"What? No. I mean, yeah of course. It's just..." Mike sputtered.

"I want to apologize. I haven't really been a good friend to you recently."

He stared at me with his big dark brown eyes. His eyebrows were furrowed.

I bit my lip, not eager to explain myself to Mike but knowing I needed to anyway. I took a deep breath. "I know I've been a bit distant, and I had no good reason to be. Before Will and I found out we liked each other, I was kind of jealous of you and Will being so close. I thought he could tell you everything, and I felt like I couldn't tell you everything because then you'd know about me liking Will, and things would be weird and awkward. I wasn't sure you'd even accept me if you knew. I'm sorry. I should have just told you." I was tearing up as I stared down at the floor.

Mike put his hand on top of mine. "It's ok. I understand why you didn't want to say anything. I'm not sure I would have told anyone ever if I liked another boy, especially one the other party members. You're much braver than me for telling him how you feel."

I looked up at him. "You really think so?"

"I know so." *Wow.* Mike really was Nancy's brother despite their many differences.

Mike took his hand off of mine and put it back to his side. "Wait, he told you I admitted my feelings first?" I asked, confused that he knew that. When Will and I revealed our feelings for each other to the rest of the party, we didn't really get into any specifics.

"Yeah. At Steve's house yesterday. He had a lot to get off his chest."

"You know he snuck up to my bedroom window last night and stayed over?"

"I knew he couldn't avoid you forever," Mike acknowledged. "I wanted him to stay and talk to you, but he said he needed more time. I was thinking it'd be like a week or something, but wow, same night."

"He's doing so much better. I actually came straight from biking with him back to his place."

"That's great!" Mike smiled. It was the first time he had smiled since I arrived.

I studied him for a moment. He was bouncing his right leg up and down, a habit of his. Mike was always a bit fidgety. "I've missed this: just the two of us hanging out."

"Me too," Mike agreed. I knew as much, since Will had told me.

"I promise I won't let us drift apart anymore. I want to tell you everything, like best friends are supposed to do."

"I guess I should have made more of an effort to talk to you too. I'm sorry I didn't help you more through your stuff with Will."

"Don't sweat it."

"So how long have you known...that you had feelings for Will?"

I thought about it for a couple of seconds. "I think I didn't really recognize them until right after Will was taken by the demogorgon. Like even that night we were playing D & D beforehand, I knew he made me feel fuzzy inside, but I wasn't sure what that meant. After he was taken and I started thinking I might never see him again, I realized how much I really loved him and couldn't imagine living the rest of my life without him."

"Nothing like your best friend getting taken by a demogorgon to put things in perspective," Mike observed.

I nodded. "How are things with you and El?"

"To be honest, I don't know. Like a lot of the time, I feel like I have no idea what we're supposed to be doing. Like how much our relationship is supposed to have progressed by now. We're still incredibly close, but sometimes I don't know if we're doing things right."

"What do you mean, like kissing and stuff?"

"No! Like how much we're supposed to spend time together or go on dates or hold hands in public."

"I think you're thinking about it a little too hard. Just do what you think is best and comfortable. If El doesn't agree, then you can talk about it."

"Thanks, Robert. That makes sense."

"Shouldn't you be the one giving me relationship advice?" I joked. "You're much more experienced than me."

Mike shrugged. "Let me know when something comes up."

"You'll be the first to know."

A smile formed on Mike's lips.

Our moment of newfound openness was interrupted when Mike's mom poked her head into the living room. "I'm going out to do some errands. Do you want me to drop you guys off at the arcade?"

Mike became excited, perking up from his signature slouch. "Sure! That's a great idea!"

"Thanks Mrs. Wheeler," I added.

"Of course. I'll pick you both up when I'm done. Should be about an hour and a half hour or so."

Mike and I stepped out of his mom's car and waved her goodbye before running into the arcade, both of us eager to start playing. Once inside, Mike started heading toward Dig Dug, but I only had eyes for the air hockey table.

"Mike, I challenge you to an air hockey match," I announced.

He gave me an incredulous look, raising his eyebrow. "Really? Why are we always competing?"

I laughed. "Are you chickening out?"

He marched over and put a couple of quarters in the machine.

"Hell no. You're on, Robert."

"That's what I thought," I said with a smirk.

Before we knew it we were caught in the most intense air hockey game of our lives, both of us furiously defending our goals and aggressively ricocheting the puck around the sides. It was a close game, with the score at 6 to 6 for a while before Mike finally scored the final goal on me. I miscalculated his shot.

"Yes! I win!" Mike cheered.

"Damn, good game, Mike. That was close." I walked over to his side of the table to shake his hand. I extended my hand out, and he grabbed it firmly and gave it a good shake. Mike and I have always been very competitive with each other, but I think our competitiveness was always a bit one sided, meaning that I tended to want to compete with him more than the other way around. It was usually just over petty things like arcade games or scores, but I also felt like I needed to compete with him over more important things

like spending time with Will or who was closer to Will. I don't think Mike ever saw it that way, because he didn't have a crush on Will like I did. Though I had instigated this game of air hockey and lost, I wasn't really bothered by my defeat so much. It was really fun hanging out with just Mike at the arcade again like old times. Also I think he secretly enjoyed our little competitions even if he didn't want to admit it.

After our air hockey game, we moved on to other games, ones with screens and high scores, each of us taking turns trying to get further and beat the other one's score, but also helping each other out. As the time passed, so did our competitive drives. We moved from Pacman to Dig Dug, to Galaga and finally Dragon's Lair, the hardest game of all.

The hour and a half we spent at the arcade passed more quickly than expected. Mike's mom came back and picked us up. When we got back to his house, Mike gave me some unexpected news as we sat in his basement.

"I haven't told anyone else yet, but I've determined the theme for our next D & D campaign."

"Oh cool! When do you think it'll be ready to play?"

"Not for another week or so, but maybe it'd go faster if I had some help with the storyline."

"I'd love to help," I offered. "We can get Dustin to help us too. I don't think he's doing anything today."

"Actually, I was thinking just you would be enough."

I stared at him for a moment. "Oh... um... ok."

Feeling like he needed to justify his reasoning, Mike said, "I don't want to spoil it for too many people. Also, it's based on the mansion stuff, and I figured your input would help a lot, since you were in that final battle."

"Say, you never told us about your vision," I observed.

"You didn't tell me yours either. No one really shared theirs in any detail to the group except Will," Mike responded.

"Touche."

"I'm going to make my vision part of the campaign. I was thinking maybe I could incorporate yours too?"

I blushed, my mind immediately racing to Will in the stands rooting for me at the baseball field. "Oh, um. It wasn't really that exciting. It was just a baseball game, and I was the star player on one of the teams. The umpire was the shadow man..."

Mike burst out laughing.

I glared at him. "What's so funny?" I demanded.

"You being the star player on a baseball team... that's hilarious!"

"It can't be that hard to imagine with that big head of yours." I grumbled.

"That can't be it, right?" Mike asked, shrugging off my half insult half comment.

I sighed. "No, it was a little more complicated than just that."

"Don't tell me any more until I get my notebook," Mike directed me, getting up to grab his thick notebook he used to plan all our D & D campaigns. It was sitting on a table in the corner of the room. He took it and sat back down. I ended up telling him everything I could remember about my vision in as much detail as I had told Will. It felt nice sharing it with someone now that I didn't have to worry about hiding my feelings for Will. When I was finished, Mike took a few seconds to finish jotting down his notes. When he was finished, he looked up at me with big understanding eyes. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. Will disappearing again. And feeling so alone and unable to do anything about it."

"Well, I figured out none of it was real pretty quickly after he disappeared, as I said," I replied.

"But I'm sure the feeling was still there, at least for a little bit. I know how much you love him. If it wasn't obvious before, it is now." Mike lips curled into a small smile after he finished speaking, conveying his joy that his best friends had found love in each other.

"Tell me about your vision. If you want me to help you more with the campaign, I should know what you saw in the mansion," I persuaded him, trying to change the subject from the pain of Will's disappearance.

Mike sighed. "Alright.

After I found my door, I was with you, Will, Dustin and Lucas. El and Max weren't around for some reason. We were headed to a house we were renting for a week or two, like a vacation home or something. It was in a suburban neighborhood, pretty similar to ours, but somewhere definitely not in Indiana. It was a nice two story home, so plenty of space for all of us. Once we arrived at the house, the owner greeted us and handed me the keys with a creepy smile. And of course the owner was the shadow man, but I didn't know that at the time.

Anyway, we got settled in, figuring out our rooming situation and whatnot. When night fell, that's when things went to shit. Turned out there was like a weird tunnel system inside the walls. I tried exploring it, only to find a demogorgon was hiding in wait. I escaped into the main part of the house. I think the others had gone out to get food or something, but you were still there. We were both freaking out, trying to figure out what to do. We went outside, thinking maybe it was safer, but it found us outside and chased me back into the house. You had decided to run off and warn the others, taking the risk that the demogorgon might follow you but allow me shelter. It seemed not to be able to go into the main part of the house but could reach through the walls and pull me in if I was too close.

I remember calling out to El, hoping she could help us. After a while, it felt like she wasn't going to respond, and I'd be trapped in the house alone. But finally she responded. And it wasn't just a fake vision El. It was really her. Guiding me out of the vision I had been trapped inside. She told me to run back to where I first remembered this trip starting. See, I didn't remember going through the door like you did. It wasn't until I reached my door that I finally remembered.

Mike looked down at the floor, his story finished. "I know it wasn't a very vivid description of what happened, but it's like a dream where it feels so real when you're in it, but then you wake up and it becomes fragmented. Things don't make as much sense after the fact, you know?"

"Yeah it was kind of like that for me too," I replied. Mike remained silent, maybe he was trying to brainstorm, or maybe he was waiting for feedback. I scratched my head. So I abandoned him in his vision. That hit a little too close to home. Is that how he's felt about me? That I abandoned him? The way he worded that part, it was like he was walking on eggshells trying to make me sound noble for trying to warn the others instead of like a shitty friend for leaving him behind. Perhaps the others had already been taken by the demogorgon or were just never going to come back because the whole thing was just a machination to trap each of us in our minds anyway. I didn't know what Max, Dustin or El (in her initial vision) had seen behind their doors but if I was certain of anything, it was that the shadow man had preyed on our insecurities in our visions. Thank god we dealt with him. "I'm sorry I abandoned you, Mike."

Mike's eyebrow furrowed. "You didn't abandon me. That wasn't really you," he said softly.

"It's like you said. The feeling must have still been there. And it obviously came from somewhere real."

Mike was quivering, his eyes starting to get watery. "I thought maybe you decided you hated me after we stopped hanging out outside of the whole party together. I kept thinking maybe I had done something wrong. It wasn't until Sunday morning when you and Will confirmed our suspicions about you two that I had kind of figured out why you stopped talking to me."

"Did what happened in your vision have something to do with our argument on the steps outside the mansion?" I asked.

"We've had our disagreements, but that time, I couldn't help but feel a little bitter after what I had just gone through. Combine that with the last few months of you being somewhat cold, and... you know..."

"Mike, again. I'm really sorry I've been such a shitty friend. I was too selfish to see how much I was affecting you."

"I should have just told you I knew you liked Will," Mike said remorsefully. "Things wouldn't have been so awkward then."

"I would have denied it," I laughed.

"Friends don't lie, remember?" Mike reminded me of our party's motto.

"Yeah, yeah."

"I can't stay mad at you. Apology accepted. Come here." He spread his arms out for a hug. I embraced him. We gave each other a couple of pats on the back. Mike was definitely a hugger, more so than Dustin or Lucas, although if a situation really called for it, they'd hug it out too.

We separated. "For the campaign, I was thinking, maybe I could help fill in the part where I run off to warn the others about the demogorgon," I suggested.

Mike picked up his notebook and pen. "Sure, fill me in."

13. Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen: The Lifeguard

The rest of that day, I helped Mike come up with ideas for the D & D campaign. It was nice to have my other best friend back in my life. I had forgotten how easy it was to talk to Mike. Talking to him was like riding an old bike that I was intricately familiar with.

When we decided to take a break from planning, we radioed Will, who was having the most boring day of his life at home. He was excited to hear that Mike and I were hanging out, but also a bit jealous because he couldn't join us.

I went home in time for dinner with my mom, much to Mrs. Wheeler's disappointment. After dinner I radioed Will again, desperate to figure out what tomorrow might bring.

"Come in, Will. Over."

"I'm here, Robert. I take it you're home now? Over," Will's voice came gently through my Supercom.

"Yeah. Over."

"Ughhh, I just want today to be over already. Over," he groaned.

"It'll be over soon." I assured him. "In the meantime, I was wondering whether you still wanted to go on that date tomorrow? Over."

"Tomorrow? Oh, um, how about the day after tomorrow? Over," Will suggested.

"Yeah, that works too. Over," I replied with a hint of disappointment.

"Can you bear one more day without me? Over."

"Are you on house arrest tomorrow too? That's kind of harsh. Over."

"No. No. I just want to prepare, you know? Over," he justified. Prepare? Will was taking this date really seriously.

"Of course. Over." I was still kind of confused but I didn't press it.

"So what's this I hear about a new D & D campaign? My favorite rogue is teaming up with the paladin to create a new adventure? Over," he flirted. We all had our roles in the party. Mike was our paladin, Will was our cleric, Dustin was our bard, Lucas was our ranger, El was our mage, Max was our zoomer and I was our rogue, mostly because I liked to bend the rules as much as possible without breaking them. Also the stealth or sneaky approach was a fun challenge.

"It's all hush-hush right now. I can't tell you much except that it's being planned. Over," I teased with a smirk he obviously couldn't see.

"Oh c'mon, give me something! What's the theme? Over." Will pleaded.

"How are you 'preparing' for our date? Over," I retorted

There was silence on the other end. "Fine. I'll wait. Can we stop saying, 'over'?"

"No," I answered, feigning a serious tone. I paused to get a reaction out of Will. I could hear sputtering on the other end. I laughed. "Yeah, we can stop saying, 'over.'"

"You're so annoying!" Will almost shouted.

"But you love me anyway," I teased.

"That I do," he acknowledged.

The following day, Wednesday, July 10th, we all went to the public pool around 11:30am, except Will, who was notably absent. I explained his absence as a personal day, which got me side eye from everyone.

"What's Will doing that's so much more important than hanging out with us?" Lucas asked rhetorically.

"Sometimes Will just likes to be alone," Mike replied.

"He said he wanted to prepare for our date tomorrow," I clarified.

"Maybe he's dolling himself up." I stared at Max with confusion. "Getting a makeover," Max said.

"Like with makeup?" I asked her. "That doesn't sound like Will."

"No, stupid. Like buying new clothes or changing his hairstyle," she clarified.

"Should I be doing that too?"

"I don't know. I'm not some kind of love expert," Max snorted. "You think Lucas did anything like that for our first date?" she scoffed.

"Hey, I put on my nicest clothes for that date!" Lucas protested. Those two had such a weird relationship built on playful antagonism that bordered on actual bullying at times. Not a model I was looking to replicate with Will. Sure we joked around and messed with each other, but I would never tear him down in front of others. Still, I knew Max meant well. It was just her way of dealing with her stressful home life and she did care about Lucas underneath it all.

I turned to Dustin. "Dustin, what do you think? Steve ever give you advice about that?"

Dustin couldn't keep his eyes off the new lifeguard, Heather. She had long raven colored hair that was tied in a ponytail and a cardinal red swimsuit. Large Jackie O sunglasses covered half her face. She sat perched on the lifeguard chair positioned around the midpoint of the pool on the side opposite of us. I didn't know much about her, except that she had been lab partners with Nancy and basically let Nancy do all the work, a tidbit which I learned when I overheard Nancy talking to Jonathan about Heather one day when I was over at Will's.

"She's never going to acknowledge you, Dustin. You're too young for her," Lucas discouraged.

"Age is just a number, Lucas," Dustin replied, not taking his eyes off of Heather. Heather was watching over the people in the pool, either blissfully unaware of Dustin's ogling or really good at ignoring it.

"Let's hop in the pool already, it's really hot," El complained.

We all jumped in. The water was warm but much cooler than the air, so it felt nice. I wondered what Will really was doing today to prepare for our date and why it was going to take a whole day with none of us seeing him? I knew he didn't like being disturbed when he drew. Maybe that's it. Maybe he was drawing something. Something special. But a whole day? Would it take him a whole day? Maybe if it was complicated enough. Like a realistic portrait or something. Of me? No, I shouldn't psych myself up for something that may not be real. I just had to accept that he wanted this day to himself and not think any more of it. Tomorrow would come soon and we'd be on our movie date soon enough.

"I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna go talk to her," Dustin decided.

"What? Are you nuts?" Lucas asked with disbelief.

"I'm tired of sitting on the sidelines while you all get to have your relationships. I'm going for it. Bite me," Dustin clapped back.

"Good luck, buddy," Mike encouraged.

"I believe in you," I said.

Dustin swam to the edge and climbed out of the pool. Lucas looked skeptical as ever. Max turned to El. "I wouldn't look. This might get ugly." El gave Dustin a smile of encouragement, but I could tell she was worried about his imminent rejection.

He made his way to the lifeguard chair. Heather didn't seem to notice him approaching.

"Hey! Heather!" Dustin called out. The older black haired girl peeked over her shoulder and noticed Dustin standing right next to her chair. She adjusted in her chair to face him.

She tilted her sunglasses lower down on her nose. "Can I help you?" Heather asked dispassionately.

"I was wondering if there are any open spaces for life guards?" Dustin asked innocently.

"Umm, probably? I heard they're looking for applicants for the junior life guard program."

"I'm a really good swimmer, and I care deeply about safety. I was thinking, maybe you could give me some pointers before I try out."

Heather stared at him for a moment, perhaps seeing through his verbal gymnastics to ask her out, or maybe just totally confused. "You want me to, like, give you lessons or something?"

"Yeah, that would be awesome."

"Are those your friends over there? The ones all staring at us?"

Dustin gulped as he turned toward us all staring at the two. Turning back toward Heather, he said, "Yeah, sorry they're being weird."

"That's Nancy's brother right? The pale one with the freckles?" she asked pointing to Mike.

"Yeah, why?" Dustin said nervously.

"Nancy helped get me an A- in chemistry when I probably would have failed otherwise. For that, I'll help out one of her brother's friends," Heather said.

"Sweet. When are you free?" Dustin asked, trying his hardest to contain his excitement.

"Wednesdays and Thursdays 10 to 11am."

"I'll be there."

"See you then," Heather said, adjusting her oversized sunglasses back up and turning her attention back to the pool.

Dustin walked back toward our part of the pool, made sure Heather wasn't looking and pumped his fist in victory.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"She said yes!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Shut up, no she didn't," Lucas said.

"She's giving me lifeguard lessons twice a week," Dustin continued.

"Lifeguard lessons?" El asked.

"You're looking at the next Hawkins junior lifeguard," Dustin said proudly.

"I didn't know you wanted to be a lifeguard. That's awesome, Dustin," Mike said in support.

"Do you really want to be a lifeguard? Or are you just trying to get some alone time with Heather?" Max interrogated him, giving him side eye.

"Does it matter? Let him have this," El nudged Max.

"I'm proud of you, man," I said.

"Thanks, Mike and Robert. It's nice to know some people support me, unlike other people, *cough* Lucas and Max*cough*," he replied, glaring at the couple.

"I just don't want you to get hurt, is that such a crime?" Lucas questioned his friend. Dustin ignored him, not interested in Lucas's negativity.

The rest of the day was pretty non eventful, just a typical day with the party sans Will. After leaving the pool, we went to Mike's and changed back into our normal clothes. We then went to the local mall and looked around at some clothing stores. El and Max got excited over some tank tops and went to try them on. I kept an eye out for Will, but I never saw him. I had this fantasy that maybe I would run into Will shopping for new clothes with his mom, and he'd be embarrassed, but we'd laugh it off. Then he'd join the rest of us, and I wouldn't be walking around wondering why he didn't want me or the rest of the party to see him today. His avoidance of the party today wasn't like when he abruptly left Steve's pool party the other day. He seemed fine last night on the Supercom, excited even. Technically we were both keeping secrets from each other since I couldn't tell him about the D & D campaign and he couldn't tell me what he was doing

today to "prepare" for our date.

Later that evening, as I lay in my bed bored, I finally heard from Will. It had been about twenty-four hours since I had last spoken to him.

"Robert! Robert! You there?" my Supercom buzzed with Will's voice.

I sprung to life as I grabbed my Supercom off my nightstand. "Yeah, I'm here."

"I can't wait for tomorrow!" Will breathed.

"Me too!" I exclaimed.

"I'm sorry we couldn't hang out today, or most of yesterday," he apologized.

"Me too."

"I miss you," he said softly.

"I miss you too, Will. But just think how great it will be when we see each other again. Wait, what time are we meeting anyway?"

"There's a 3:00 showing of *Back to the Future*, so 2:45?" Will suggested.

"Perfect."

"See you then!"

"See you then," I repeated. A clicking sound from my Supercom indicated that Will had turned his off. A swirl of emotions were in my head now, and even though I wouldn't be going to sleep for a few hours, I knew I was not going to be able to sleep when all I could think about is how excited and nervous I was for our first official date.

14. Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen: The Love Expert

The morning of Thursday, July 11th, I woke up after a long night of tossing and turning in my bed. My alarm clock read 10:20am. My stomach hurt. So much for breakfast today. Or lunch. There was no way I was going to be able to eat anything when I was this nervous. I was suddenly reminded of last Saturday night at Will's house, when I refused dinner, and I dry heaved in his bathroom. I lazily strutted toward the bathroom, stripped and hopped in the shower. The spray of warm water massaged my back. I took a deep breath before I started washing myself, trying my best to relax and forget my anxiety. Was Will just as nervous as me? Something about this being official made more nervous than I should have been. Since we've been together, hanging out with and being around him felt more comfortable and natural than anything, but putting a label like "first date" on our trip to the movie theater definitely added some pressure.

After washing my hair, I shut off the water and grabbed my towel off the rack. I rubbed it all over my body until I wasn't dripping wet anymore. Stepping out, I wrapped my towel around my waist and put on some deodorant. While putting it back down, I noticed the bottle of cologne I had bought for some occasion but had almost never used. I spritzed it in the air and took a whiff. It smelled nice, like a mix between citrus and wood. I sprayed my neck and shoulders a couple of times each. Now my whole bathroom was filled with the smell. I hoped it wasn't too much. I grabbed my hair dryer and started blow drying my hair and brushing it. When my hair was dry, I played around with it moving to the side and letting fall down in bangs trying to decide what I liked more. I decided to the side looked a little fancier, so I took a fingerful of styling paste and ran it through my hair pushing it to the left. After turning my head a bit to observe my resulting style from different angles, I was satisfied and washed my hands to get the product off of them. Staring at my freshly washed hands, I realized my finger nails were getting a little long, so I clipped them next. When I was done, I left my steamy bathroom and was met with the cooler air of the hallway as it brushed against my face and shoulders. Returning to my room, I opened my closet

and stared at all the possibilities.

Ding-dong!

Someone was at the front door! Who could it be? My mom was at work and wouldn't need to ring the bell. I wasn't expecting anyone else. I couldn't answer the door in just a towel. I quickly found a t shirt, boxers, and gym shorts to put on and sprinted down the stairs to see who was outside the door.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

I looked through the peep hole and saw a mess of red hair and an impatient expression. Max? What was she doing at my house?

I opened the door. "Max..."

"It's about time you answered the door. I started to think maybe you died of anxiety or something."

"What makes you think I'm anxious?" I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible. My right arm was raised up and leaning against the door to hold it open.

Max gave me side eye. "You reek of cologne and you're wearing gym clothes."

I had no comeback. "Why are you here?"

"I had a feeling you might need some... guidance," she explained, eying me from top to bottom. "And clearly, you do."

"Oh, so *now* you're a love expert?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do you want my help or not?"

"...Yes. Come in," I conceded. Max marched right in, leaving her skateboard on the floor next to the front door. I shut the door behind her.

"Trouble in closet paradise?" she asked as we walked upstairs. She stared at my hair for a second. "At least your hair looks good."

"I didn't even get a chance to look before you interrupted me. I just threw this on to answer the door, unless you wanted to see me in just a towel. And thanks."

"Ew, no thank you," she grimaced. She stepped in front of my already open closet. "Alright let's see what you got here." I stood back as she rummaged through my button down shirts. "Let's keep it short-sleeve. Got to be weather appropriate. That narrows it down a lot too." She pulled out two shirts, one was maroon with white pin dots, and the one was faded light blue with salmon colored and white horizontal stripes. "What do you think?" she asked, holding the two shirts on their hangers in front of her.

"I don't know. Maybe the striped one?"

"Wrong. The correct answer is none of the above," Max said, tossing them on my bed. I stared at her with disbelief. I think she was having a little too much fun with this. She proceeded to pull out a blue and red hibiscus floral print shirt. "The correct answer is this one. Have you even worn this?"

"Yeah, like once or twice," I replied.

"Good. You don't want to wear something he's seen you in a million times," Max instructed me. "This shirt says you're not afraid to step out in style. It's bold and playful. Nice, but not too dressy." She handed it to me.

"Cool. What about pants?"

"You're going to the movies, not a fancy dinner. Just put on a nice pair of jeans. Stay on the darker side though. And not too baggy either, but you never have a problem with that. I'll let you change." She stepped out of my room. I closed the door. I found a good pair of dark blue jeans in my drawer and changed into them and the shirt. I opened the door to let Max back in. "What do you think?"

"Robert, you're gonna knock his socks off," Max smiled. I smiled back tentatively.

"Thanks, Max. I really appreciate you helping me out."

"No worries. We still have some time to kill. It's lunch time. Wanna grab some food?"

"You can go ahead, I'm not hungry."

"Oh, you got it bad, don't you?" Max asked knowingly.

I nodded.

"At least try to eat something at the movie. You'll make him feel weird if he's the only one eating. You know how much he loves his cherry slushies and popcorn."

Max made herself a PB & J sandwich, which she devoured quickly. The rest of the time we spent chatting about our home lives, hers way more screwed up than mine, and gossiping about the other party members. Nothing bad, of course. I wondered why Max was so keen on helping me today. I hadn't really seen her go out of her way for me like this before, but I was grateful she chose today to do so. It was nice to have a friend like her. Max and I had different sorts conversations from the ones I'd have with Mike, Dustin, Lucas or even El. They had a healthy dose of snark and were a little less geeky. I had a feeling we would grow even closer now that I wasn't hiding my feelings for Will from her anymore.

I looked at my watch. It was 2:00pm. "Oh my god. It's 2! I have to go if I'm going to bike there on time."

Max grabbed my arm. "You can't bike there. You'll ruin your hair."

In my confusion and frustration, I started pacing. "Then how am I getting to the theater? My mom is at work. I guess could see if Jonathan will pick me up too..."

"No. Don't embarrass yourself like that."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

Beep! Beep! A familiar honk blared from outside my house.

I perked my head toward the front door. "Is that...No, he wouldn't."

"He thinks we're going to the movie together, and my dad forced him to drive us," she explained.

I stared at Max in shock, my mouth partially open. "Max...you lied to your family just to get me a ride?" She nodded with a smirk. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"I know. Just be cool and don't mention Will," she warned me as we walked out the door toward her step-brother's light blue Camaro. I nodded. I opened the door for Max and she hopped in the back seat. I bent down and stepped inside after her.

"So, you finally got sick of that Sinclair boy, did you, Max?" Billy sneered turning his head toward us while running his hand through his greasy long dirty blonde hair. He was chewing on a stick of gum, making smacking sounds when he spoke.

"No. Robert and I are just two friends going to a movie," Max answered calmly.

"Sure. Whatever you say," Billy said sarcastically. He became more serious as he leaned in closer to Max. "You owe me."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get out of here," Max asserted.

Billy put the pedal to the floor as he sped away from my house and toward downtown Hawkins. The car ride was quiet but tense. I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to draw any attention to myself. Billy seemed to notice the lack of chatter in the back seat because he spoke up about it.

"So what's your deal, Robert? You haven't said a word since you got in my car."

"Leave him alone," Max gritted her teeth.

Ignoring her, Billy continued talking. "You're always so quiet. Kind of like that Byers kid. You hiding something? Or are you just disappointed this isn't the date you thought this was?"

"I said leave him alone!" Max said louder.

"Shut up, and let him speak for himself," Billy hissed.

"I'm an open book." I finally said, trying to sound confident.

Max shot me a concerned glance and shook her head.

We finally pulled up in front of the Hawk, which cut this stressful conversation short.

"Looks like it's your lucky day. Maybe we'll 'open that book' another time. Enjoy your movie," Billy sneered. Max and I hurried out of the car, and she slammed the door behind her. Billy sped off, Max doing her signature flip-off as he drove away.

"I'm so sorry," Max apologized. "I would've had Steve drive us, but he said he was busy today."

"Don't be." Will had not arrived yet. I stared up at the marquee, which had *Back to the Future* on top and a list of showtimes, including the 3:00 showing I was about to see. I started feeling butterflies in my stomach.

"I don't know if I can do this," I admitted. It was something I had been thinking the past few days but never could say out loud until now.

"Hey, it's going to be ok. You're just going to the movies with him."

"I don't want to screw our first date up. What if I say something stupid or do something he doesn't like?" My eyes were starting to get watery. "

Max hugged me. "You're not going to screw anything up. Just be yourself, and don't think about the whole "first date" thing too hard. He's probably just as nervous as you, if not more so since he took an extra day just to prepare himself. If something really does go wrong, I'll be nearby, but I don't expect that to be necessary."

"Thanks for...everything," I sniffled.

She let go of me. "Wipe your eyes, dude. You should be excited! You don't want Will to know you've been crying."

I wiped my face with my arm and rubbed my eyes.

"I better go, before Will sees me here," Max said. "Good luck!" She started skating away.

I waved at her. "Thanks again!"

She turned and flashed a smile at me quickly as she continued to skate further and further away.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen: The First Date

Admittedly I was still a little nervous (how couldn't I be?), but Max really did make me feel better overall about the whole thing. And she went out of her way to help me get ready for the date as well. She was a true friend, that was for sure.

I checked my watch. 2:45pm. The time Will and I had agreed upon. It wasn't like Will to be late. Just then, I saw it: Jonathan's Ford LTD pulling up to the curb right outside the theater. It stopped. My heart was beating at least twice as fast now. The front passenger door opened, and Will stepped out. He waved Jonathan goodbye, and Jonathan drove off. Will turned toward me and smiled.

"Hey, Robert!" Will called out cheerily.

At this moment, everything felt like it was going in slow motion. Will started walking over to me. He was wearing the white dress shirt he wore at the Snowball dance with the top button undone and no tie. It was tucked into a pair of tight dark blue jeans. He was also wearing chocolate brown loafers and a matching color belt. *So much for not dressing up, Max.* Then I noticed it. His hair! It was completely different. Shorter on the sides and the back while the longer top was brushed up and held in place with some styling paste. His ears were visible, and his bowl cut was gone! My mouth was agape as he continued making his way toward me.

"Your hair..." was all I could muster, too shocked to say anything more.

Will stood in front of me. His outfit made him seem taller than normal for some reason. Maybe it was the jeans. I know he had grown a few inches since last fall, as he was now a bit taller than Dustin. His expression shifted from joyful to concerned as I continued to stare at him jaw opened.

"You don't like it?" he asked, seeming a little hurt.

His self-consciousness shook me out of my trance. "You haven't changed your hairstyle once in the eight years I've known you..."

"I knew it was a mistake," he blurted out, looking disappointed. "It was stupid to change it and..."

I put a finger up to his mouth to shush him.

"No, I love it. You look so handsome," I smiled.

Will's face lit up to its former excited state. "Thanks! I decided it was time to try something different, especially since high school is coming up and what better time to make a change than the summer before, and this date seemed like the perfect opportunity to get it cut. I didn't want everyone to see it beforehand. That's why I was being all secretive about yesterday," he ranted.

"Well, I think it's amazing, and it's nice to see more of your face. Everyone else is going to totally freak out!"

His beautiful hazel eyes twinkled as he smiled. "I know. That's why I wanted you to be the first one to see it." He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes until showtime. "Let's get our tickets! The movie's gonna start soon."

I nodded. We started making our way to the ticket booth. Will hadn't said anything yet about my appearance. Did I screw something up?

As if Will read my mind, he turned around and said, "Oh my god, I'm such an idiot. You look really handsome too. I love your shirt! Is it new?"

I blushed. "I've only worn it like a couple of times to some family things."

"You should wear it more. It suits you," he grinned as we waited our turn in line to buy tickets.

"Thanks," I smiled. *Good call, Max.*

It was our turn at the ticket booth. I went up to the glass. "Two tickets to *Back to the Future*, please."

Will nudged me and shot me a look of shock. "Wait, you don't have to buy both our tickets. I brought money."

"It's ok. I insist," I assured him. Will did not protest further. I handed some folded up bills to the guy behind the booth. He gave us our stubs. I thanked him and led Will inside. "If we're going to do this right, then one of us has to pay for the both of us, right? It's usually the guy pays for the girl, but in this case..."

"I'm the girl?" Will interrupted me.

I laughed. "No, Will, if you were a girl, we wouldn't be going on this date. What I was going to say is that since we're both guys, I guess we'll just have to take turns paying."

"Oh ok. That seems fair."

"C'mon let's get some snacks. My treat."

He thanked me. I bought us a bag of popcorn and a slushie for each of us: cherry for him and blue raspberry for me. He begged me to get him some peanut M&Ms even though I was running low on cash. God, movie theater food was so overpriced. Still, I gave in. How could I say no to his puppy dog face?

My stomach was feeling better by this point. The few minutes I had spent with Will had already made me much less nervous about the whole thing. The pressure I had put on myself to make this date perfect seemed stupid now. Maybe it was the extended absence of him in my life the past couple of days that let my expectations and anxieties fester a little too long.

Carrying our snacks, we made our way into the auditorium and found a couple of seats near the back in the middle of the row, perfect for making out without being noticed.

At 3:00pm sharp, the lights dimmed and the trailers started. We had seen all of them before from when the whole party went to see the movie last week, so we both kind of tuned out.

"I can't wait for the movie to start," I whispered in his ear.

"Me too," he whispered back. We continued to munch on our popcorn.

Finally the trailers finished. The theater was moderately filled but nothing like the crowd on the first night we saw it.

After the opening scene with Marty McFly in Doc's lab, "The Power of Love" blasted through the theater's speakers as Marty skateboarded to school. Will was humming along softly. It was one of his new favorite songs. I couldn't help but hum too. Will and I had a bad habit of shouting out and quoting during movies, so it took everything we had to not start singing along loudly. Unfortunately for the other moviegoers, we couldn't help ourselves anytime a character said, "Great Scott!" We just had to say it with them.

I slowly started inching my arm toward the back of his chair. Before I knew it, he grabbed my arm and put it around him. He leaned into me, his familiar intoxicating scent washing over me and making me forget the buttered popcorn smell that had dominated the air before.

"Nice cologne," Will whispered with a little giggle.

"Thanks," I breathed softly before taking a sip of my slushie.

Even though we had seen the movie already, our eyes were glued to the giant screen. The comedic dialogue and gags like Marty appearing as Darth Vader in George's bedroom still made us laugh uncontrollably. We cheered when George punched Biff out cold.

When we reached the part where George and Lorraine finally kiss at the Enchantment Under the Sea dance, I caught Will staring at my mouth. I knew exactly what he wanted. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. I leaned in and pressed my lips against his. He closed his eyes and let my blue raspberry stained tongue slide into his mouth. He tasted like a sweet and salty mix of popcorn butter, peanuts and chocolate. Will's tongue brushed up against mine. I parted my lips, allowing him entrance into my mouth. A small groan escaped my throat as his cherry slushie stained tongue darted into my mouth. Damn, I needed this. Will had always been extremely cute, but his new haircut unlocked a whole new level of attraction in my mind. Now he was hot, with playfully tousled hair that looked almost

effortless. I felt like the luckiest boy in the world to be kissing him like this. I think both of us had been a bit unsure about interrupting the other's viewing experience by making out, but when George and Lorraine kissed in the movie, we couldn't restrain ourselves any longer. We kept going at for much of the rest of the movie, separating only to watch the climatic scene outside the Hill Valley Courthouse of Marty and 1955 Doc Brown working to get Marty back to 1985. That part kept us on the edge of our seats, even though we already knew how it played out. Fortunately no one was sitting next to us or behind us, so we could kiss without judgement. It was in places like this that the cover of darkness could conceal our displays of affection.

The movie finished and the lights came back on in the theater. We made our way out of the theater. Will had the goofiest grin on his face. I'm pretty sure I did too.

"That was even better the second time," I decided.

"Definitely," he agreed.

"Give me a Pepsi Free," I quoted.

"You want a Pepsi, pal, you're gotta pay for it," Will finished my quote exaggerating his voice to sound deeper. I chuckled at his voice acting.

Doing my best Darth Vader impression, I quoted another funny line, "My name is Darth Vader." I put my right fist across my chest like Marty did in the movie. "I am an extraterrestrial from the Planet Vulcan!" I attempted to do the Vulcan salute, but struggled to do it right. Laughing, Will grabbed my hand and tried to fix my fingers, but they wouldn't part enough without him holding them.

"You can't do the Vulcan salute?" Will asked.

"I guess not," I sighed.

Will did it himself effortlessly.

"Show off," I giggled.

"I'm pretty sure the others can all do it. Maybe El can force your

fingers to do it correctly," he laughed.

"Maybe." I pictured El staring intently at my fingers attempting to part them. I imagined her being confused why she was being asked to do something so trivial that supposedly everyone else could already do on their own. The thought made me smirk.

We walked toward the door to leave the building. I held the door open for Will.

"You're such a gentleman," Will grinned at me as he stepped outside.

I followed him out. We stood under the shade of the marquee, not wanting to stand in the hot sun.

"How did you get here?" I didn't see your bike anywhere when I arrived. And isn't your mom at work?" Will wondered.

"Max gave me a ride," I admitted.

"Really?" Will tilted his head. "Wait, you mean?"

I nodded.

"Oh... um... how did that go?" he asked with a hint of concern.

"Pretty much how you'd expect," I answered, kicking some pebbles on the ground. "I made it in one piece, that's what matters."

"Robert, does Billy know about us?" Will questioned me. "I don't want him to know about us."

"No, of course not! He thinks Max and I went to the movie together," I assured him.

Relieved, Will giggled. "You and Max, that's funny." He paused for a second. "Wait, where did she go if she was with you?"

"Probably waiting somewhere nearby. She said she'd stick around the area until the movie was finished."

Will's eyes widened. "Robert, we need to hide. Now." Will said,

becoming dead serious. He pulled me into the alley to the right of the theater, a spot where Will's older brother had been arrested a year and a half ago for attacking Steve to defend Nancy's and his family's honor. "If Billy's coming to pick Max up at the theater, we can't be seen together there. God, I wish Jonathan would get here already."

"Why don't you go over to Melvald's? I'll meet Jonathan outside the theater and we'll come get you there? I'm sorry I didn't think this whole thing through. Max kind of just showed up unannounced at my house earlier."

Will gave me a puzzled expression.

"I'll explain later. Just go." I looked around to make sure no one was walking nearby before giving him a peck on the lips.

He nodded and ran off. What a weird end to this movie date. Well, it could have been much worse. Besides, a little drama like this made the whole thing a little more exciting.

I walked out of alley and back over to where Will and I had been standing outside the marquee. Moments later, Max came from around a corner.

"I saw Will run off. Did something happen?" She stepped toward me, a look of confusion and worry painted across her face.

"No, it's just that Billy coming to pick you up here made us getting out of here a lot more complicated," I explained.

"Oh, damn it! I'm sorry. I didn't even think about that. I should have told him to pick me up somewhere else."

"It's ok. We figured something out."

"So how did it go?" Max pressed me. "Did you actually watch the movie or were your faces pressed together the whole time?"

"Both," I smirked.

"You two are adorable," Max laughed. "Also I only saw him from a distance but if my eyes didn't deceive me, it looked like his hair was

shorter?"

"Don't tell anyone!" I said more roughly than I meant to.

"Ok, I wasn't going to, jeez," Max said, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Sorry, he wanted it to be a surprise," I explained more gently.

Before Max could say anything more, the familiar roar of Billy's Camaro filled my eardrums. He pulled up by the curb and rolled the passenger window down.

"Get in," he commanded.

"I gotta go," Max said. "Glad your date went well." She hurried off and hopped in her step-brother's car. I waved her goodbye. They sped off, leaving me alone outside the theater. A few minutes passed as I switched back and forth between glancing at my watch and the road. Finally, Jonathan's car rolled up to the curb. The engine died and Jonathan stepped out.

"Where's Will?" Jonathan asked me, looking worried and confused.

"At Melvald's. I'll explain in the car."

"Wait, isn't someone picking you up?"

"No one's coming for me," I replied.

I got in the front seat and put my seatbelt on. As we drove to Melvald's, I explained the Billy situation to him.

"I see," he said after I was finished.

After the extremely short drive, I got out and entered the store to grab Will. He had been talking to Joyce, who had been surprised to see her younger son at work.

"Bye, honey! I'll see you in a little bit. Sorry I couldn't pick you up from the movie theater." She planted a kiss on his forehead.

"Mom!" Will groaned. I smirked at Will's embarrassment from getting

kissed by his mom in front of me. Just as Will was about to push the store door open, Joyce called out to me.

"Robert! Do you want to come over for dinner? We're having Chinese."

I looked at Will. He nodded at me. "Sure, sounds great. And I promise I'll eat this time," I accepted.

Joyce smiled at me. Then I'll see you in a little bit too. My shift is almost done."

Will and I waved her goodbye before pushing the door open and heading back to Jonathan's car.

Will and I hopped in the back seat, cozying up together.

"Ok, where to, lovebirds?" Jonathan asked with a sly grin.

"Home," Will said with a smile, his eyes on mine.